Anti-Corruption Tabloid Journalism in Africa

Brian Chama
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# Contents

1 **Introduction**  
*Tabloid Journalism Practice*  
*Situating Tabloid Journalism*  
*Investigative Tabloid Journalism*  
*Corruption and Tabloids*  
*Corruption Stories and Agenda Setting*  
*Anti-corruption Tabloid Journalism in Africa: Outline*  
*Bibliography*

2 **Anti-corruption Tabloid Journalism in Zambia**  
*Anti-corruption Tabloids*  
*Copper Shipment*  
*Slash Fund*  
*Zamtel*  
*Political Patronage*  
*Corruption Impunity*  
*Conclusion*  
*Bibliography*
United Bank of Africa 102
Conclusion 106
Bibliography 107

7 Nigerian Tabloid Journalism and Corruption Practices 109
  Corruption in Nigeria 110
  Anti-corruption Tabloids 112
  Lamido Sanusi 115
  BMW Scandal 119
  Conclusion 122
  Bibliography 123

Part IV

8 Tabloid Journalism and Corruption in Uganda 129
  Corruption in Uganda 130
  Corruption in the First Family 132
  Anti-corruption Tabloids 134
  Global Funds Diversion 137
  Red Pepper Tabloid 140
  Conclusion 142
  Bibliography 143

9 Tabloid Journalism and Anti-corruption Crusade in Kenya 147
  Anti-corruption Tabloids 148
  Corruption and Bribery 150
  Goldenberg 153
  Anglo Leasing 155
  Triton Oil 158
  Conclusion 160
  Bibliography 161
Part V

10 Anti-corruption Tabloids in Democratic Republic of Congo

Corruption in Government Institutions 167
Tabloid Journalism and Corruption 168
Kabila Regimes 171
Glencore 175
Conclusion 180
Bibliography 181

11 Corruption and Tabloid Journalism in Cameroon 183
Corruption in Cameroon 184
Anti-corruption Tabloids 186
Albatross Affair 190
SNH Scandal 193
Conclusion 195
Bibliography 196

12 The Final Word 199
Anti-corruption Tabloids in Africa 200
Lessons for Africa 202
Back to the Future 204
Conclusion 207
Bibliography 207

Author Index 209

Subject Index 213

Anti-corruption Tabloid Newspapers in Africa Index 217

African Countries Index 219
The goal of this book is to use Africa’s case studies to gain a clear understanding of the evolution of anti-corruption tabloid journalism in Africa and derive insights into the relationship between the anti-corruption actions of the state, and the anti-corruption reporting by the tabloids and tabloid journalists focusing on major corruption scandals.

Basically, a tabloid newspaper is traditionally a half the size of a broadsheet newspaper. However, in recent years, tabloids now encompass content dominated by screaming headlines, sensational pictures, and sensational stories. In fact, the origin of tabloids is very dubious and it is very difficult to point out the actual date in time when tabloid newspapers emerged. For instance, Biressi and Nunn (2008) note that they refer not only to changing formats in shifting historical contexts, but also to values and attitudes attached to these format. For example, Wasserman (2008) points out that the tabloids in South Africa peddle sensationalism and articulate politics of everyday lives of readers who seem to live on the periphery of society. It is this articulation of the politics of everyday lives that has contributed to the popularity of tabloid newspapers in Africa.

Furthermore, in the comparative study of tabloids and quality newspapers in Kenya, Ongowo (2011) notes that tabloids use salacious and sensational news accompanied by colourful pictures which are attractive to people with limited reading abilities. Similarly, a study by Opolot (2005: 33) explains that the fact that the tabloids in Uganda continue to attract readers is a clear testimony that people love them and it is the main reason why many readers actually buy them regularly and find them useful.
However, debates continue to emerge on how far tabloids in Africa can go in exposing corruption and hold those who abuse public resources to account. For instance, Phiri (2008: 13) while discussing the evolution of anti-corruption journalism in Africa looking at lessons from Zambia explains that tabloids have now taken the muckraking model in exposing corruption by breaking corruption scandals and producing reports that bring unethical behaviour to public attention. Besides, Paletz (1996) notes that the muckraking model drawn from the history of American journalism exhibits great promise in providing a framework that captures what is now going on in anti-corruption tabloid journalism in Africa. The idea behind the muckraking model is simple, as the imagery implies that the muckrakers, who are generally investigative tabloid journalists, now unearth and expose corruption through their tabloids.

Indeed, this book provides evidence of the successes and struggles of anti-corruption tabloid journalism practice in Africa. It goes at length by looking at different countries and analysing the role of tabloids in exposing corruption and the actions of the states and government agencies entrusted with the role of fighting corruption.

**Tabloid Journalism Practice**

The practice of tabloid journalism continues to attract scholarly debates. Many arguments are centred on the quality of information and style of writing often provided by the tabloids in comparison with traditional broadsheets. Since this book is on anti-corruption tabloid journalism in Africa and uses the continent’s cases to derive insights into the relationship between the anti-corruption actions of the state, and the anti-corruption reporting by the tabloids, it is very important to discuss the field of tabloid journalism as a practice and also look at relevant scholarly debates.

It is vital to note that tabloid journalism generally focuses on human interest stories with heavy in pictures and short stories that are graphically told. The term ‘tabloidization’ is associated with news content that focus on scandals (Bird, 1992). It is these content which attract critics to view tabloids as a form of journalism which is a complete departure from what is traditionally seen as the role of journalism which is to provide information vital for the readers to make informed decisions (Esser, 1999).
Furthermore, tabloids are often criticized for being sensational with news stories. It is this attachment to sensationalism of every news content by tabloids which has led to accusations that these newspapers play with readers’ emotions (Sparks, 2000). Moreover, Bird (1992) notes that apart from using emotive language, there remains confusion on what exactly constitute the key contents in tabloids and that it is a basically a news medium in which every thing goes to attract readers’ attention.

Despite the sustained criticism of tabloids, other scholars have come to their defence arguing that they are relevant in human affairs. For instance, Ongowo (2011) explains that readers buy tabloids because they find them useful to their lives and are proud to read them in the streets, in the public transport, and even in the living rooms. It is because tabloids provide content which they cannot access from other news media.

Similarly, Wasserman (2008: 2–7) argues that tabloids continue to enjoy popularity because they communicate ‘politics of everyday’ especially for readers who feel far more removed from formal politics through their daily lived experiences. It is within this context that tabloids can be read and seen as containing a political message even though not in the same way associated with public sphere of official media.

Furthermore, Fiske (1989) notes that tabloids provide very important escape routes from the news content which is often dominated by the elites and especially the politicians with their failed promises and policies. In fact, tabloids have the ability through their sensational language to question the dominant social standards. In addition, tabloids are able to offer an index of extent of dissatisfactions in society especially among those who feel powerless to change their current situations.

Moreover, Johansson (2007) argues that the practice of journalism is not merely about transmitting information on public issues to help the citizens gain knowledge to arrive at responsible judgements. It is this wrong view of journalism practice which has contributed to unfairly treating tabloids as insignificance side of news. Instead of generally regarding journalism as exclusively to convey information, there is need to engage in cultural discourses and acknowledge that people can connect with news through many ways. Moreover, the relationship between journalism and society is more complex than merely the transmitting of dry information (Johansson, 2007: 440).
SITUATING TABLOID JOURNALISM

This book uses Africa’s cases to understand the evolution of the anti-corruption tabloid journalism in Africa and to gain insights into the relationship between the anti-corruption actions of the state, and the anti-corruption reporting by the tabloids and the tabloid journalists. Therefore, it is very important to situate the tabloid journalism practice within the African context.

The practice of tabloid journalism in Africa is very unique. This is largely because of various limitations often placed on press freedom in many countries. In fact, many tabloids that tend to adopt the Western view of tabloid journalism practice usually ends up having a limited life span. This is because such tabloids often face many cultural, legal, financial, and political problems. However, this does not mean that there are no success stories of tabloids becoming popular and attracting massive readership.

For example, Opolot (2005: 33) argues that tabloids have been in and out of Uganda for quite a while. However, it was not until 2002 that tabloid journalism took on a different meaning. In fact, up until then, each entrant had come with puff and pomp but often never lived to see its first anniversary. However, the Red Pepper tabloid newspaper has managed to shame the prophets who predicted its doom from the day it was registered in the country in 2002. Its longevity has been due to its raunchy and sensational stories in a country that has been dominated by ‘serious’ newspapers that kept away from sensational in favour of ‘serious’ content. This is not because they did not believe that the tabloid approach would bring new readers and an extra dollar, it was more the media law and the cultural environment that dictated their content.

Similarly, Ongowo (2011: 22) citing the tabloid Weekly Citizen explains that since its inception in 1997 in Nairobi Kenya, its owners and journalists have worked to grow its circulation. It often dwells mainly on sensational stories of Kenya and concentrates on publishing stories on corruption scandals taking place in private and public. For example, it concentrates on stories touching on politicians and very often breaks and publishes stories which are later picked up by the so-called quality newspapers. Moreover, the tabloid has since established itself as a voice of the ordinary people.
Furthermore, Wasserman (2008: 1) explains that the tabloids in South Africa have enjoyed unprecedented popularity with the *Daily Sun* now the biggest newspaper in the country, with around four million readers. It was established as a colourful downmarket publication by Deon du Plessis. In 2000, the first copy of the tabloid was printed, and within three years, the circulation was close to 500,000. It has since become known for attention-grabbing headlines and pictures, with sales which have kept rising becoming the best-selling and widest read daily newspaper in sub-Saharan Africa.

Basically, tabloids in many African countries are generally known for hard-hitting headlines. It is within this context that they play an important role in the curbing of corruption using sensational headlines on corruption to pressure government to act in the public interest. Tabloids headlines also draw the attention to behaviours that are generally perceived as unacceptable and raise public awareness (Phiri, 2008).

However, access to information is a major challenge faced by many tabloids in Africa which is at the heart of transparency and public accountability. The lack of access to information makes it hard for tabloids to hold public officials accountable. For example, the notorious ‘Official Secret Acts’ in many African countries limit tabloids access to information on grounds of national security. Moreover, the government in many countries has the discretion to define what constitutes national security and often abused by political leaders to prevent tabloids that venture to expose corruption. Besides, to silence tabloids that dare to expose corruption, criminal defamation, libel, and sedition are used and justified as necessary to safeguard national security. These laws limit tabloids freedom in accessing and publishing information (Nogara, 2009).

Furthermore, the government in many African countries often exercise considerable control and usually put pressure on critical tabloids. For example, in countries where the state is the main source of advertising, critical tabloids are sometimes deprived of advertising revenues. Moreover, the fear of being put in jail, the threat of expensive libel suits, the risk of the licence being revoked, and even the loss of advertising revenue and other financial resources, all impose a burden on tabloid journalists and their newspapers, encouraging a culture of silence (Eigen, 1999).
INVESTIGATIVE TABLOID JOURNALISM

Since this book is on the evolution of anti-corruption tabloid journalism in Africa and the relationship between the anti-corruption actions of the state, and the anti-corruption reporting by the tabloids, it is therefore critical and important to explore what actually encompasses investigative tabloid journalism and investigative tabloid journalists.

Investigative tabloid journalism is generally a style of journalism that goes beyond the usual coverage of news and seeks to unearth hidden information behind the news and expose the malpractices. Basically, this form of journalism exposes actions that have the power to injure society and uses sensational language accompanied by sensational pictures to expose wrongdoing (Ongowo, 2011). Investigative tabloid journalists go beyond routine reporting to bring to light clandestine schemes calculated to benefit the plotters and to disadvantage the great majority (Kantumoya, 2004).

For instance, Horrie (2008) explains that investigative tabloid journalism starts after a suspicion of wrongdoing. Then, rather than simply reporting in a more passive way, tabloids go deeper to expose the truth and realities behind the news stories. It is important to acknowledge that although this brand of tabloid journalism is still relatively new and undeveloped in many countries in Africa, it is fast gaining recognition as a valuable tool for monitoring public accountability using sensational news reports.

Basically, investigative tabloid journalism involves not simply casting the light on a subject, but making a more prosecutorial case that something is actually wrong. Generally, this type of tabloid journalism often results in official public investigations about the subject and activity being exposed. Similarly, de Burgh (2000) argues that in most occasions, it results in legislation that outlaw certain forms of wrongdoing.

However, Kantumoya (2004) notes that this type of reporting requires tabloid journalists having an entrenched culture of hard-nosed muckraking journalism. Unfortunately, many tabloids have no existing frame of reference to serve as a guide when it comes to undertaking this kind of enterprise. Furthermore, reporters usually grope in the dark and learn the nuts and bolts of the trade by trial and error in the field. It is this situation that leads to reporting half-baked stories, and quite often, with serious legal consequences for the tabloid newspapers (Kantumoya, 2004).
On the other hand, tabloids that engage investigation genre often focus on common wrongs that include personal scandals, financial wrongdoing, corruption, and enrichment in public office. Furthermore, the best investigative tabloid journalists do not only expose individuals, but also the systemic failures that contribute to wrongdoing (Coronel, 2010). Moreover, such reporters are able to show how individual wrongs are part of a larger pattern of negligence and abuse, and the systems that make these patterns and failures possible. Furthermore, they are able to examine what went wrong and show who suffered from the mistakes. These talented tabloid journalists are able to probe not just what is criminal and illegal, but also what may be legal but nonetheless harmful and are also able to start the debate and even provoke political action over some issue that might be officially closed or not publicly known (Horrie, 2008).

Similarly, Ongowo (2011) argues that investigative tabloid journalism has evolved into three forms; original investigative tabloid journalism reporting, interpretative investigative tabloid journalism reporting, and reporting on investigations by investigative tabloid journalists. Original investigative tabloid journalism reporting involves tactics similar to the ones used by the police of uncovering information never before gathered by others in order to inform the public of events and circumstances that might affect their lives. Interpretative investigative tabloid journalism reporting involves careful analysis of ‘facts’ to provide deeper public understanding. Reporting on investigations develops from the discovery of information and can be even from the leak that is obtained from an official investigation underway (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007).

The nature of investigative tabloid journalists to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable with often sensational exposure often puts the reporters in conflict with the power elites, the rich, and even the corrupt who seek to conceal the information. For example, de Burgh (2000) points out that there are times where the flow of information is suppressed by the power elites, and investigators sometimes have to use tactics such as hiding their identity and invasion of privacy. Sometimes it can also involve buying of information from the whistle-blowers so as to expose wrongdoing (Ongowo, 2011).

Despite the challenges facing investigative tabloid journalism in Africa especially with regard to often serious gaps in the quality of the reports, and usually lack depth and accuracy of facts (Mbeke, 2010), on the other hand, Kiai (2010) explains that this new form of tabloid journalism reporting has emerged because of the growing public disgust with
corruption in many countries in Africa. For example, there is evidence in many countries, of the continued rise of corruption cases being investigated, not only by law enforcement agencies, but also being reported by the tabloid newspapers. Henceforth, the tabloid journalists continue to play a very important role in the fight against graft in public offices and misdemeanor in society (Ongowo, 2011).

**CORRUPTION AND TABLOIDS**

The African countries with functioning states often express a strong desire to curb corruption and to work with stakeholders including the media. However, studies that examine exactly how far tabloids influence the decisions of public actors in Africa’s anti-corruption agenda are still very few (Chama, 2017). Besides, there is generally an agreement in the studies, that tabloids play a significant role in anti-corruption campaigns (Phiri, 2008).

It is important to stress that tabloids reports often give legitimacy to anti-corruption fight. For example, when citizens read in the tabloids that the official bodies entrusted to deal with corruption are actually preventing corruption before it occurs and that, when it is reported, they investigate and prosecute the culprits, this stirs a feeling among the readers that these entities are doing their work. But tabloids are only able to do this if indeed the anti-corruption agencies are doing their work (Stapenhurst, 2000).

Generally, there is a direct correlation between corruption and the mediocre performance of many public services and business enterprises in Africa. Moreover, the African Union which is a continental organization consisting of 55 countries on the African continent is also concerned with the negative effects of corruption and impact on political and economic stability of Africa. It has even adopted an anti-corruption convention since 2003. It is for this reason that corruption is a big story in Africa and tabloids are able to play a major role in fighting the scourge (Phiri, 2008).

Therefore, in African countries with proper functioning bodies and freedom of the press, the apparatus and organizations fighting corruption cannot succeed effectively and efficiently without the power of the media as partners. Indeed, tabloids are an important partner in combating corruption and exposing inefficiency. In fact, tabloids are crucial players in the combat against graft and are able to play a crucial role in fighting corruption by producing reports that bring unethical behaviour
to public attention using sensational language accompanied by sensational pictures. Tabloid news because of its sensational nature is an important motivation for official bodies charged with investigating and prosecuting corrupt acts to act and often prompt the resignation of public officials (Anassi, 2005).

The sensational reporting by tabloids often leads to public debate and heighten the sense of accountability. In fact, there are many examples across the continent in this book in which tabloids have been aggressive in exposing corruption which has led to arrests and even the prosecutions of the corrupt officials. The most spectacular among them is when corrupt public office holders are prosecuted and even forced to resign after their misdeeds are exposed to public light (Stapenhurst, 2000).

Moreover, there is also evidence in countries covered in this book to show that the hard-hitting sensational news on corruption by tabloids can very often provide the initial seed that can prompt the official bodies to launch their formal investigations. Even though at times, the official anti-corruption bodies might be reluctant to investigate because of conflict of interests for example, or maybe either because they are incompetent and lack the capacity to investigate and prosecute, but the persistent sensational reporting has the power to force them to take actions. This often happens when the general public become aware of the regular and persistent reporting and start to question their leaders’ commitment to the fight against corruption (Phiri, 2008).

Arguably, in many countries in Africa, there exists a culture tolerance for corruption and when individuals and official office holders find an opportunity to have access to public funds, there is a belief that bettering their economic situation is important, and sometimes this happens at the expense of corrupt means. Moreover, there is also a cultural acceptance of corruption, even at times admiration, and envy of corrupt individuals. It is within this context that tabloids create an awareness of the corrosive effects of corruption on the economic and political well-being of the country. Furthermore, tabloids exposure of corruption through sensational naming and shaming can actually lead to attitude change beginning from cognitive level to induced behavioural change (Stapenhurst, 2000: 2).

Moreover, tabloids with more resources are actually able to undertake solid investigations that force state actors to take early actions. However, it is important to acknowledge that anti-corruption tabloid journalism is a high calling. In pursuing and fighting corruption, tabloids themselves face strong possibility of being caught up in scandals. For example, in
many African countries, the so-called brown envelop journalism which is the accepting of financial benefits for certain actions is the corruption destroying the image of journalism profession in general. It is also deepening the cynicism about journalists and making them part of the problem. Therefore, it is vital for tabloid journalists who investigate corruption to have an ethical obligation to their readers who expect them to be honesty as they demand it from others (Phiri, 2008).

**Corruption Stories and Agenda Setting**

Anti-corruption tabloids’ hard-hitting front-page headlines with sensational pictures can have effective reactions from readers and can set the agenda which can lead to agencies that fight corruption to react and force those involved in corruption to either resign or be forced out of their positions. In fact, there is a relationship between government’s anti-corruption campaign and anti-corruption tabloid journalism. This is because, tabloids can influence public opinion and decision-making of public officials (Ayodele, 2012).

For instance, the agenda setting in the anti-corruption tabloid journalism practice generally describes the ability of the tabloids to influence important topics on the public agenda. That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the readers will regard the issue as more important. For example, when tabloids engage in relentless corruption exposure with regular screaming headlines and sensational pictures on the evils of corruption, and how it is destroying the country and making many people suffer, the readers start to view the issue of corruption as very important, and this helps them to consider it as more important than any other issue (McCombs, 2005).

In fact, agenda setting can create public opinion and awareness that corruption fight is an important issue by tabloids. It can lead to tabloids influencing ideas of readers and establishing that the corruption fight is not only a major issue, but a very important daily news item that affect all citizens. The two basic assumptions that can help in setting the agenda when it comes to anti-corruption tabloid journalism are that: the tabloids can filter and shape perception of corruption reality; tabloids by concentrating on anti-corruption fight and corruption exposure can lead to the public to perceive corruption as an important subject which require attention (Rogers & Dearing, 1988).
Generally, the more frequently and prominently the tabloids are able to cover an issue of corruption fight, the more instances of that issue becoming accessible in readers’ memories. It is in this regard that when the tabloids readers are asked about the most important problem facing the country; are likely to answer with the most accessible news in memory, which is typically issue tabloids focus on the most. The agenda-setting effect in anti-corruption tabloid journalism is not about the result of receiving one or a few anti-corruption tabloid news items, but is due to the aggregate impact of a very large number of corruption messages, each of which have a different content but all of which deal with the same general issue (Iyengar, 1990).

The tabloids coverage in general can have a very powerful impact on what readers think about corruption and its exposure. The readers can allocate more importance to issues of corruption if extensively covered by tabloids. For instance, if tabloids are able to cover stories of corruption regularly, and run impactful headlines and sensational pictures, readers start to realize the importance of the subject. Moreover, the very nature of tabloids format which operates on big colourful pictures can attract attention. Furthermore, the continuous exposure of corruption stories to the readers can lead to awareness among readers to see the news as the most important issue facing the country. This is because the tabloids are able to put corruption coverage at the centre of their stories and treat news item on corruption as more prominent (Noelle-Neumann, 1977).

The ability of tabloids to predetermine what issues to give prominent importance provides an edge to fight corruption. For example, Folarin (2002) explains that agenda setting does not ascribe to tabloids the power of determining what readers actually think, but does ascribe to the power to determine what readers are thinking about. Therefore, the fight against corruption by tabloids can be effective through increased frequency of reportage of corruption activities in the country. For instance, by giving prominence to corruption activities through headlines display, pictures, and layout in newspapers, tabloids can go a long way in reducing financial mismanagement and bribery in the country. Moreover, if the public officials come to the realization that that their corrupt activities will be given a lot of publicity, they are likely to rethink their action before engaging in corruption and financial mismanagement (Ayodele, 2012).
This book is on anti-corruption tabloid journalism in Africa. It uses the continent’s case studies that uncover corruption and the role of watchdog journalism. It explores and analyses the emerging patterns and lessons for the future. For example, Woldeamanuel (2012) while looking at perceptions of Ethiopian journalists notes that watchdog journalism basically involves activities of journalism genres that monitors the daily activities of the public institutions in order to help the people assess their performance. It is for this reason that African journalists generally believe that they have a responsibility to serve the general public by watchdogging over the government. Moreover, watchdog journalists also believe that the government holds a lot of power which has the capacity to affect the lives of the ordinary citizens and thus needs to be monitored and activities exposed. The overall perception is that watchdog journalism’s aim in Africa is to check the abuses of leaders who hold a lot power and enjoy massive wealth. Its genre involves exposing not only their wrongdoing and how that could be redressed, but also hold them to account for the immoral and often illegal activities.

Besides, Kasoma (2000) while looking at the press in multiparty politics in Africa explains that watchdog role of the press in Africa involves the press’s duty to promote transparency, accountability, and good governance by revealing to the public things that the government is doing or not doing, and which deserve public attention. Moreover, the press has the responsibility to make sure that it is able to explain government activities and actions, or even the lack of it, to the people clearly and coherently. In addition, the press has the responsibility to inform the masses about any abuse of power by the ruling authorities. However, the press needs to be a constructive critic to the government and not be an enemy. It should help the government and its leadership to pay attention to the welfare of the general public. Indeed, the watchdog of the press involves helping the government to work in the best interest of the people and not to inflict injury on the government and its political leaders. But watchdog journalism should not be a free rein, it should be accompanied by observing professional responsibilities.

Similarly, Karikari (2007) in discussing African media since Ghana’s independence explains that generally watchdog journalism can help to put a check and balance on government institutions and its leadership, monitor the misuse and abuse of power, guard the public interest, and
generally contribute in nurturing democracy. Moreover, watchdog journalism basically involves the press vigorously and daringly reporting on issues of national concern that captures the attention of the readers, and at times stands at loggerheads with the government. Besides, the press by their watchdog role are able to identify wrongdoing in public service delivery and expose corruption and abuse of power. It is therefore of vital importance for the press to be efficient and professional in order to satisfy the public and discharge their watchdog role.

While looking at corruption clean-up in Africa, Mbaku (2008) explains that watchdog journalism involves educating the general public about corruption and its negative effects on development. It also gives the citizens the ability to determine the behaviour considered corrupt and to report individuals involved in corruption to relevant authorities for further action. Indeed, watchdog journalism plays an important role in cleaning up the corruption through investigation and exposure of embezzlement, which also paves way for the law enforcement agencies to gather more information needed in order to prosecute the wrongdoing and bring about accountability. Furthermore, watchdog journalism is critical in the exposure of corruption in Africa partly because there exists widespread corruption in almost every area of governance and leadership. Even though the common argument is that the low salaries among the public service employees are the major reason for massive corruption and looting, even those in good paying positions are also regularly implicated in corruption and embezzlement. In fact, the higher paid employees actually tend to ask for high bribery charges to get things done and tend to use their positions as opportunities to make money quickly and easily.

Moreover, Agbo (2017) provides a critic of the influence of the watchdog role of the press in Nigeria noting that it involves investigating ‘facts behind the facts’ particularly in governance and political leaders. It is meant to hold leaders accountable and responsible to the people. Its role is to check on government activities and warn the public when officials are doing something wrong. It is about informing citizens about the errors and wrongdoings by the government and hold its officials accountable. Basically, watchdog journalism is important in many African countries whose legislature and judiciary seem to have neglected their oversight functions. Indeed, the press are often left as the only check against the abuse of power and corruption, with a view to bring about transparency and accountability, through the monitoring of the actions of the government, and informing the masses about what their leaders are doing in secrecy.