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Media Narratives in Reflections on Good Governance and Accountability in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

Media narratives in reflections on good governance and accountability in government has remained a major challenge globally. Weak accountability has resulted in the increases in the risk of underperformance in governance and huge failure in public administration, which are characterized by constant blame among government organs have significantly limited the chances of good governance in Nigeria. The media over the years have been significantly active in the country's political and democratic processes. The media are the pillars upon which good governance and accountability stand, thrive and survive. Therefore, the significance of the media in holding government accountable to the public cannot be underscored. Within this context, this paper examines media narratives in reflections on good governance and accountability in Nigeria. The paper pins down that media's potentiality to contribute to good governance and accountability depends on the extent to which the media reflect and enforce the principles of good governance and accountability in performing their functions as the fourth estate of the realm. The paper interrogates the role of the media in achieving transparency and holding government accountable, while highlighting some relevant issues that serve as bottleneck to the actualization of good governance. The paper also investigates the nexus between the media, democracy and governance. The paper concludes that the media contribute significantly to socio-political development in the society and it is barely possible for any society to achieve good governance and accountability without the media. Thus, transparency and accountability in governance can only be achieved through the influential power of the media. The paper recommends adherence to the professional ethics and the principles of social responsibility by the media which can go a long way to foster good governance and accountability in a democratic system like Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria is 60 years old as an independent nation, yet, it is still struggling with facts about its social reality. Ethno-religious violence and general fear of the unknown are literarily redefining the concepts of understanding and trust as the basis of peaceful coexistence in different parts of the country. The nation is literarily grappling with basic issues about its identity as a people, understanding and accepting its diversities, and being able to effectively and equitably manage the realities of pluralism. In all of that, the media have been variously involved in defining the issues of integration and relationships in the heavily multicultural and diverse country. Indeed, the use of the media to promote good governance and accountability in the context of Nigeria is apt.

The provision of section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria places an obligation on the press to uphold the responsibility and accountability of government to the people. Thus, democracy can hardly survive and achieve its yearnings in any society where there is no accountability, transparency and the inclusion of majority of the people in governance and in determining the input into the process of development; all of which are guaranteed through a free and independent media (Auwal, 2018). Therefore, the responsibility of the media in holding the government accountable to the people is fundamental to the overall success of democracy.

Paraphrasing the words of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the objects of the media is to understand the popular feeling and give expression into meaning, which arouse people to the desirable sentiments that will fearlessly expose popular defects. The foregoing statement by Gandhi explains the importance of media in upholding freedom and in expanding education and social reforms and change. Media can inform people giving them the voice to be heard and heeded to. Democracy requires that people should have the right to know the activities of the government, especially the decision of the government that affects their life, liberty and property. Information is important for people to make choices regarding their participation in the State, the market and the civil society. Media also fearlessly exposes issues that make people to be more informed than misinformed. Sufficient information helps people to decide rationally and take the right course of action beneficial to them. The media also help people to know what is happening around the globe. By publicizing information, the media also make public services more responsive to the people (Msughter, 2019).Within this context, the paper sets to examine the role of the media in achieving good governance and accountability in Nigeria.

The paper is exploratory in nature, as it utilises the descriptive research method whereby relevant literature, documents and records were consulted and analysed based on the existing literature in order to interrogate media narratives in reflections on good governance and accountability in Nigeria. The paper is predominantly based on information derived from the qualitative data using secondary sources, such as relevant texts, journals, official publications, historical documents and the Internet, which served as tangible sources of insight into the analysis. However, the inquiry is strictly limited to data found in scholarly journals, books, Internet and libraries, and not anecdotal sources. The method was used to evaluate such findings with other existing literature on the subject matter. The method helps findings in the works available, checks the consistency of such findings, evaluates such findings with other findings.

The Context of Nigeria's Democratic System

Nigeria operates the presidential system of democratic governance across three layers. The country has a poverty index of 67.1% with about 42.4% of the population living below the poverty line (World Bank in Pate, 2021). The context of Nigeria's democratic system is characterized by high unemployment, acrimony on national unity, challenges in the country's agriculture, education, healthcare, democracy, the justice system, defense expenditure, crime control, protecting the environment and fighting corruption and economic crimes (Pate, 2021).

Nigeria is a nation in tension. The Fragile States Index (2017) rated the country as the 13th least stable nation in the world after Somalia, Yemen, South Sudan, and Central Africa (Fund for Peace Report, 2017). Pate (2021) remarks that Nigeria is hugely diverse with complex structural, systemic and existential challenges that produce tensions and threats, which in some cases explode into violence, terror, hatred and irredentist tendencies that affect security, order and peaceful conduct of individuals, groups and communities. The country has fought a civil war, experienced a devastating insurgency (Boko Haram) and battling numerous conflicts, extreme terror and violent crimes in the Niger Delta, kidnappings, armed robberies, and high-profile financial corruption, drug and human trafficking. All of that make the society tense, dangerous and conflict ridden with implication on media and journalism practice.

The situation is compounded by deep rooted culture of systematic corruption in the country. On a consistent basis, Transparency International has rated the country poorly on the global corruption index (TI, 2016). In September, 2017, a national corruption survey by the United Nation Office for Drugs and Crimes, the European Union and the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics found that 46.4% of Nigerians have had "bribery contact" with police

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officers, 33% with prosecutors and 31.5% with Judges or Magistrates. The survey revealed that custom officers, judges, magistrates and prosecutors were the public officials who received the largest average cash bribes from Nigerians. The study also found that "a third of Nigeria adults (32.3%) who had contact with a public official between June 2015 and May 2016 had to payor were requested to pay a bribe to that public official" (NBS Website, 2017).

Corruption in Nigeria is a very complex phenomenon that affects every facet of life in the country. In the words of a former Chief Justice of the country, Mahmud Mohammed (*Daily Times,* July 19, 2016), corruption in the Nigerian context "breaches the fundamental human rights of citizens, undermines the collective security; aggravates poverty, while threatening the legitimacy of constitutional governance and democracy." Corruption has been majorly responsible for the country's underdevelopment, poor elements that breed desperation, frustration and aggression in the system. In the words of Ogunmupe (*The Guardian,* September 9, 2016), over time, corruption has shattered the confidence of citizens, organistions, and investors in the Nigerian governance system.

Recently, government at a point appeared unable to enforce governance in some parts of the country because of insurgency and militancy, thereby disrupting social harmony, undermining the productive sector and arresting development. In a scenario where leaders, legislators and ministers and other government functionaries are perceived to be corrupt, private sector organisations and investors also try to shirk their duties. They find ways to avoid tax; the result is that government is deprived of income to sustain the security and development of the nation. As a result of corruption and poor governance, governments fail to address crucial issues that can promote societal harmony, which in a way intensifies conflict over resources, political offices, and desperation in the land.

Expectedly, all of the diversities and contradictions in the Nigerian nation are reflected in the country's media. Issues like ideology, religion, regionalism, ethnicity, and politics of resources allocation, power sharing and other divisive national tendencies are openly debated in the media.

The Role of the Media in Enhancing Good Governance and Accountability in Nigeria

As established by Auwal (2018) in a democratic society like Nigeria, the role of mass media is anchored on their famous status as 'Fourth Estates of the Realm'. To corroborate this, the 1999 Constitution, stipulates under section 22 that "the press, radio, television and other agencies of mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained

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in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people". The Constitutional provision clearly explains the obligation of the media in a democratic society.

In a democratic environment, according to Olusola in Auwal (2018) the media's purpose extends beyond the basic functions of information, education and entertainment. The media also have the responsibility of sustaining and nourishing the ideals of democratic ethos and to constantly assure and guarantee the protection of freedom of individuals and that of the media themselves, which is the heart of popular participation in liberal democracies. The press can promote good governance by educating voters, protecting human rights, promoting tolerance among various social groups and ensuring that government is transparent and accountable, etc.

According to Akinwale (2010) the press helps to keep the public informed, it entertains, educates, sets standards and establishes values for public conduct and the poplar reference to the media as 'Fourth Estate' points to their capacity to perform the role of watchdogs, by monitoring those in authority, exposing their limitations and providing checks and balances to other three estates: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary (Nwagbara, 2010). Through the aforementioned functions, the media set an agenda, organise public debates and discussions and interpret issues to put them in proper perspective in order to make meaning to people just like the Presidential debates that was orgainsed by the media during the 2019 general election where presidential aspirants were invited to talk to Nigerians (Sambe, 2008 & Harcup, 2009). Whether electronic or print (Asemah, 2011), the media has responsibilities to the society political, social educational and religious (Akinwale, 2008). The media's duty to individuals, as well as to the society at large is immeasurable. In fact, the media are important asset to the society and when utilised properly can serve as viable tools for socioeconomic and political development (Abagen, 2009).

Why Media are particularly important for Nigeria in the Quest of Good Governance and Accountability?

Since good governance comprises of accountability, transparency, responsiveness, equitable and inclusive as well as effective and efficient, media have a huge role in ensuring that all of these criteria are met from time to time. Good governance essentially means how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources and the media role in these is reporting all that transpired to the public domain (Riddell, 2014). The media reports on the 2019

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general election are very commendable efforts and it is most embarrassing to Nigerians that this could occur, even in a country with the facade of a civilized nation.

For a developing country like Nigeria which still reels with voter's apathy, buying of vote, snatching of ballot boxes and asterism (Nwanna, 2001), the involvement of media becomes even more important. The backward and ignorance of the poor should make the media emboldened regarding their responsibility to bring them modern ideas for eliminating poverty and other social evils like they are doing in reporting issues regarding corruption.

Another reason why media are of paramount importance for the country is because of the immense disparity that is prevalent (Ferejohn, 1999). Despite largest populated country of the world, it is ranked pathetically lower than even some of its neighbours in the Human Development Index. While a large number of journalists cover the more glamorous and glitzy events and news, less they report on the number of deaths or the unemployment scenario. The rationality of media lies in helping the government fight diseases, such as Covid-19, AIDS, Polio, Cancer along with promoting latest technologies for the development of its citizens.

Media should be vigilant about the laws of the country and that they are not violated by institutions of the government or any other rogue elements. In this aspect, media in Nigeria have demonstrated their excellence in bringing to book some of the corrupt politicians in recent times. In fact, it has gone an extra mile by putting pressure to ensure that justice is given to victims. A lot of governments across the world have faced charges of corruption highlighted by media and that has often led to either overthrowing of corrupt administration or bringing in more transparency into the system, such as the overthrown of the then Ghanaian president HillaLimann by Jerry Rawlings, Samuel Doe who overthrown the government of William Tolbaert in Liberia in 1980 and that of Idi Amin who was overthrown by Yoweri Museveni in Uganda. Hence, the Fourth Estate can help in efficacy to the existing scheme of things as well.

One of the strongest roles of media is that they try to engage millions of viewers, listeners or readers. In this manner, the fundamental role of ensuring participation of its citizens in the decision-making process of the country is done by the media very well. Even with the concluded 2019 general elections, the media provide avenue for the Nigerian populace to express their views and opinions.

The Nexus between the Media, Democracy and Governance

Since the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999, Nigerian politicians have evolved a political culture that is characterised by the politics of godfatherism, corruption and

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misappropriation of public funds and electoral malpractices in order to control state power against the popular will of the masses among several other ill practices (Philip, Samson & Ogwu, 2014). Philip *et al*., (2014) further argue that a society with vibrant media institutions can strengthen democracy and facilitate good governance. Given that democracy is conceived as a system that operates on the principles of equality, participation, majority rule and minority rights, rule of law and due process, respect for human rights and free and fair elections; there is the need for an institution, such as the media to facilitate the entrenchment of these values in the society. Also, the active participation of the people in government, signifying the exercise of their sovereignty as stipulated in the Constitution is achievable through the media, which provide free flow of information and viable platforms for the expression of views and opinions.

This could be the reason why Jega (2014) observes that for good governance and accountability to thrive in any given society, the media must provide people with access to all the information needed to guide and safeguard their electoral choices. Thus, the media serve as the bridge between government and the citizens in a democratic system. Media, according to Ate (2007) can connect government and the governed and electorate to the candidate in a democratic setting. The central message about media and governance is that the latter dictates the former in the society and both play complementary roles in serving the populace. This forms the basis of the inseparable relationship between the media and governance.

According to Auwal (2018) there is a peculiarly intimate relationship between the political and communication process and no institution as sizeable and as influential as the media can escape involvement with government and politics. The media are not only channels for the transmission of political information and debates but also significant players with a direct stake in government regulatory and economic policies, as well as government attitude towards free speech and dissent. Moreover, the tripartite relationship, which embraces good governance and accountability are expected to be catalysed by the Fourth Estate of the Realm of the mass media (Idemudia, 2008 & Terlumun, 2010). Although factors such as mutual distrust, excessive secrecy especially on matters of national interest, undue restrictions imposed on the media through obnoxious legislations, extra-judicial actions, among others characterise the relationship between the media and the Nigerian government particularly in the past. This is not far from what Abone and Kur (2014) describe as 'a cat and mouse affair'.

Amidst the challenges influencing this relationship, the media are indispensable tools in the efforts towards sustaining democratic values and promoting good governance in the society. This press has tried its best since independence to monitor governance to uphold the

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responsibility and accountability of government to the people (Bamidele, 2012). Since the democratic dispensation, which started its run in May 29, 1999, the success of democracy is easily identifiable from the measure of press (Baran, 2004). However, it is instructive to infer that, if democracy is to survive and be a fruitful concept, the role of the media in sustaining it cannot be overemphasized and if the media are to have any meaningful role in good governance and accountability, they must be free from undue control of government (Sowunmi, 2010). The ultimate goal of media in any society is to serve the public interest and it is therefore evident that a complementary relationship exists between the media, democracy and the process of good governance. Media in this context are viable channels that stimulate and foster pressure group on issues that are in the domain of the public because pressure group is the guiding element of governance.

Theoretical Underpinning

The study espoused on Issue Attention Cycle. The theory was propounded by Downs (1972). The basic assumption of the theory is that, issues regarding the environment tend to "suddenly leap into prominence, remain there for a short time, and then gradually fade from the center of public attention." He calls this process the "issue-attention cycle," one of the most intriguing theories regarding environmental public opinion. Downs' theory contains crucial insight into the subject matter of good governance and accountability in Nigeria. Ultimately, the issue-attention cycle has the potential to aid in the understanding of how the media can foster good governance and accountability in order to improve the quality of the environment, by paying attention to issues that affect the collective existence of Nigeria as a nation.

In order to analyze the public's current opinions on good governance, it is critical to first understand how Downs defines the issue-attention cycle, specifically his description of the stages that are involved. Essentially, and rooted both in "the nature of certain domestic problems and in the way major communications media interact with the public," there are five stages of the issue-attention cycle. The first stage, known as the pre-problem stage, takes place when a highly undesirable condition or situation occurs that has not yet caught the attention of the public, regardless of whether or not experts or interest groups were already aware of the problem. The next stage, known as the stage of alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, consists of the public suddenly becoming both "aware of and alarmed about the evils of a particular problem." This awareness is usually accompanied by what Downs refers to as "euphoric enthusiasm," due

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to the common belief that one can "solve the problem" or achieve something effective within a relatively short time.

The next two stages highlight the decline of interest within environmental issues (good governance), resulting in an immense decline in euphoric enthusiasm. Thus, the third stage of the issue-attention cycle is realizing the cost of significant progress. This entails the spread of a gradual realization that the cost of solving the problem is much higher than originally expected. More specifically, it would take a great deal of money and resources, as well as "major sacrifices by large groups in the population." This results in a realization by the public that the problem is usually a direct result from some extremely beneficial aspect of their lives.

Thus, Downs succinctly puts it, the previous stage "almost imperceptibly" transforms into the fourth stage; the gradual decline of intense public interest. Essentially, and as more and more people realize the difficulties and time consumption involved with solving the problem, several reactions take place. Some people may get discouraged, others feel "positively threatened by thinking about the problem," and still others simply become bored with the issue. Of course, a combination of these feelings can occur as well, but it is essential to note that what tends to happen during this stage is that the public desire to keep attention focused on the issue at hand gradually fades away. Ultimately, by this point in time another issue seeking attention has already emerged within the second phase, becoming a "more novel and thus more powerful claim upon public attention" (Msughter, 2018).

The fifth and final stage, the post-problem stage, occurs when an issue has been replaced and "public concern moves into a prolonged limbo." Furthermore, sporadic instances or recurrences of interest are likely to occur, especially due to the fact that during the time of interest on a given topic, new institutions, programmes, or policies may have been created that contain the possibility to have continued, albeit to a much smaller degree, aiding in discovering solutions to the issue. What is key to understand here is that any major problem that was once elevated through the previous stages of the issue-attention cycle has the potential to "sporadically recapture public interest" once in the post-problem stage. The problems that have managed to go through the cycle contain a much higher average level of attention, public effort, and general concern than those still in the pre-discovery stage.

One of the shortcomings of the theory is that not all major social problems go through these stages of "issue-attention cycle". That is to say that not all major social problem goes through this "issue-attention cycle." This is because some majority of persons in society may not be suffering from the problem nearly as much as some minority. Notwithstanding, despite its

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shortcoming, it is still relevant to this paper. The nexus between the theory and the paper is that, issue-attention cycle theory contains crucial insight into what is currently happening with public opinion about good governance and accountability in Nigeria. Therefore, the issue-attention cycle as presented by Downs contains many practical uses in understanding of public opinion and environmentalism. Over long periods of time, the issue of good governance and accountability in Nigeria has potentially pique and drop on multiple occasions, with the media playing an influential role in exactly where and when this occurs. Thus, the theory holds a vital position in the understanding of how the media can foster good governance and accountability in Nigeria.

Direction of the Literature on Good Governance and Accountability: Examining the Journey so Far

Santas and Dogara (2016) observe that the media contributed immensely to the return of democracy in Nigeria. Thus, the media through their critical analysis of the military juntas, mobilisation of the citizens to participate in entrenching democratic values, exposing cases of corruption, made public officers accountable to the people despite the great performance of the media in promoting democracy, they faced with challenges with border on issues of ethnicity, lack of adequate modern communication gadgets, hassle from pressure groups and the government, ownership questions, corruption and security issues among others. Today, one can safely boast that democracy is gradually taking root in Nigeria with the successful transition from one democratically elected government to another. However, one cannot say Nigeria's democracy has developed, as the media must work assiduously hard to sustain and consolidate the success recorded by the media, the government must take some deliberate and concrete steps in overhauling the entire media industry in the country.

Similarly, Senam and Udo (2015) stated that given the dynamic nature of a technology-driven society, journalism is beyond the conventional practice of reporting based on the 5Ws and H and requires more of an in-depth analysis of the information so reported. Critical journalism, according to the authors, has played an invaluable role in the sustenance of democratic governance, especially between 1999 and the present era of democratic governance. Such roles include checkmating excesses in governance and bridging the communication gaps between the government and the governed. However, the quality and nature of the freedom in a nation's media speaks volumes about the quality of the nation's democracy. Despite the problems facing the Nigerian media, critical journalism greatly contributes to enhancing democratic governance.

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To continue to remain relevant in this crusade, journalism should strive beyond merely reporting based on the 5Ws and H approach but engage in in-depth investigation and unbiased analysis to upgrade the standard of conventional journalism to critical journalism.

In a review of the role of media in good governance, Dunu (2013) argued that media's potential to contribute to good governance depends on the extent the media reflect and enforce the principles of good governance as an institution. For the media to contribute effectively in enthroning good governance they must as a matter of responsibility apply the basic principles of patriotism, accountability and transparency in the discharge of their duties while upholding sanctity of truth and fairness at all times. The media themselves must be credible example of good governance concept, by upholding professional ethical rules set up through self-regulation and constantly enhance professionalism, be accountable to the public in the way they inform, educate and entertain. In summary, the media should recognise that they are accountable for their actions to the public, their profession and themselves.

Also, Santas (2014) recounts that the Nigerian media have recorded success in bringing public officers to account by exposing corrupt practices among governments' functionaries. A good example is the case of Jaafar Jaafar, the editor of online *Daily Nigerian* newspaper exposing the Governor of Kano Umar Ganduje for $5mn bribery allegation from the contractors. However, transparency and accountability are essential pillars of good governance the world over and these virtues are significant in measuring the success or otherwise of any democratic system. Apart from the activities of anti-graft agencies in combating corruption, the media are often looked upon as important institutions in the fight against corruption in any system. This draws from their watchdog function of monitoring the actions and inactions of those in power.

It is evident from the literature that since independence, the Nigerian media have been at the forefront of the struggle for the enthronement of democratic values and good governance in the society. The media have undoubtedly evolved and become more active in influencing and shaping the society, especially as their roles complement in nurturing the essential elements necessary for the survival of good governance and accountability. In relation to governance, the media hold government accountable by highlighting and exposing the activities of public office-holders at various levels. However, persistent arguments on whether or not the Fourth Estate in Nigeria is living up to expectations in the quest for true democracy, good governance and accountability, exists among scholars and professionals in the media industry. Thus, it is the conviction of this paper, that in spite of these challenges, the media are doing reasonably well in this regard but, with too much emphasis on government accountability, rather than civic or

individual responsibilities, of considering that tasks of promoting democracy, good governance and accountability lies not only with government but citizens as well. Citizens also have a role to play in complementing the efforts of government.

Apparently, the media have a responsibility to ensure fairness in the electoral process, respect for human rights and the rule of law than other societal institutions. Haruna (2014) is of the view that most people learn about issues and events from the media and the media have immense power to set society's agenda because they are arguably the most important sources of information and knowledge. The media are very important assets a society should have because they stimulate growth and improve the economy of a nation as well as platforms for the exchange of ideas and debates. The importance of media to the electoral process and in ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law cannot be ignored, as they contribute significantly to the political processes at national and international levels. The media have three basic functions in this regard: surveillance of the world to report on-going events, interpretation of the meaning of events and socialisation of individuals (Olayiwola, 1991).

Despite the biased and partisan nature of the coverage of political activities as well as the electioneering campaigns of the 2019 election resulting in crises in some parts of the country, the media played a major role in ensuring that Nigeria remains united amidst security challenges. The incorporation of new technologies into the electoral process like the biometric card reader and the use of broadcast and other social media platforms during and after the elections, especially in the collation and announcement of result and the efforts of the media in educating as well as mobilizing public support in the entire processes, point to the fact that the media remain dutiful in promoting democratic values and enhancing the credibility of Nigeria's electoral process. The recent agitations by civil society organisations and pressure groups for the autonomy, are among other instances where the contributions of the media in providing platforms for concerned stakeholders to debate toward enlightening the general public, remains sacrosanct in a bid to promote good governance and accountability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the findings from the existing literature, the media have risen over the time and they would gain more importance in the times to come as many across the world still yearn for good governance or at best governance itself and not autocratic rule. While media do highlight some of the concerns from time to time, they do not delve deeper into the real issues. The checks and balances, which media ensure by reporting issues in an objective manner, can go a long way

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in ensuring good governance and accountability in their reportage in the context of competence, truthfulness, dynamism and relevance.

Apparently, the Nigerian media can play a more effective role in the quest for good governance and accountability if professional standards are followed. In particular, the media need to show more commitment to the universal ethics of the profession with strong attachment to the sacredness of facts. Once the facts have been subjected to disrespect, the way is wide open for all sorts of professional misconducts, ranging from "protocol journalism" to bribe taking, to be perpetrated. In the process, important considerations are compromised, including good governance and accountability in government. These are the contemporary ethics problems of the Nigerian media. The paper concluded that media are the major pillars for good governance and the citizens remain the most important stakeholders in the democratic process. Consequently, this paper recommends that:

1. Achieving good governance requires the understanding and participation of every member of the society. Thus, the media must serve as bridges between the government and citizens in order to champion the democratic processes. This is so because the media are independent institutions and the most powerful weapons to make this a reality.

2. Adherence to professional ethics and the principles of social responsibility by the media can go a long way to foster good governance and accountability in a democratic system.

3. There is a need for forth-coming researchers in the area to adopt other methods aside secondary data to expand the fraction of literature in the area.

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