

## SOLUTIONS TO THE CHALLENGES IN REPORTING FINANCIAL CORRUPTION: QUALITATIVE STUDY ON SUDANESE JOURNALISTS

Yassin Bashir Hamid<sup>1</sup>, Abbas Ramdani<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia

<sup>2</sup>Institute of Excellence for Islamic Jerusalem Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia

E-mail: [abbas@uum.edu.my](mailto:abbas@uum.edu.my)

Received: 20.05.2020

Revised: 17.06.2020

Accepted: 04.07.2020

### Abstract

Media plays a pivotal role in the struggle against corruption in all nations. Journalists in African counties, however, are faced with various challenges in performing their roles. The efforts of Sudanese journalists in detecting and reporting financial corruption is even more challenging due to several factors such as censorship restrictive laws, economic pressures, and press freedom. Hence, the purpose of this study is to identify solutions for the challenges facing Sudanese journalists in reporting financial corruption. Adopting a qualitative approach, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists and editors across both governmental and private newspapers operating in Sudan. The collected data were thematically analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of the issue and the analysis process was facilitated by using NVivo 8 software. The findings suggest five valuable solutions for the challenges of financial corruption reporting in Sudan, namely: Media institutions merging, Legislations and press freedom, Adequate training, The Usage of digital technology, and Collaboration among journalists.

**Keywords**--- Finance Corruption, Framing, Journalism challenges

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.31838/jcr.07.08.304>

### INTRODUCTION

In democratic nations, the media play its effective role as a tool for checks and balances and satisfy normative political functions such as socialization, control, and information. The media is often known as "Fourth State," and one of its core functions is to keep an eye on the compliance with democratic values, rules, and laws. But unlike the legislative, executive, and judiciary, the media have no formal authority to sanction corrupt practices by government officials; hence, media perform its public control indirectly (Köbis & Starke, 2017). The situation, however, is different in developing countries, especially in African nations. The media in these countries encounter many challenges and journalists face various obstacles in performing their watchdog role (Saleh, 2015).

Corruption is by nature an underground activity, and it is improbable that academic research in the area is able to expose more than what public investigation is able to do. This is further restricted by limitations in academic research methods (Skjerdal, 2010). However, during the past two decades, research on corruption has steadily been growing. It has gone from being a taboo subject, where it would only be referred to as the C-word, to today's state of the art where it is found across different social science disciplines; whether this is political science, psychology, economics or anthropology (Varrich, 2016). Despite this growing development in the study of corruption issues, studies on corruption and the role of media in reporting and combating financial corruption are very scarce in the context of Sudan. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that corruption is a global threat that negatively affects the efficiency of the state, and weakens the social and political institutions in both developed and developing nations (Hamid, Mohammed, & Ahmed, 2018).

In Sudan, journalists and media entities face many challenges in regard to framing and reporting financial corruption. In a country that is greatly suffering from a high ratio of corruption and public officials' misconduct, the media can be a very effective tool in mitigating this negative phenomenon. Yet, the role of journalists in Sudan is restricted and hindered by many

challenges. According to Rugh (2014), in Sudan, the political regime utilizes the press as a tool for political mobilization of popular support, while implementing censorship and tight control over the media (Mughtar et al., 2017). This prevents journalists, editors, and media professionals from contributing positively to the social and political life in Sudan. Furthermore, the obstacles faced by the press institutions in Sudan have not only hindered the press from performing their role professionally but also resulted in the political elite and companies to manipulate editorial direction and news content directly and remotely. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to identify solutions for the challenges facing Sudanese journalists in reporting financial corruption. The study is organized into five sections, the remaining parts of the paper proceeds as follows: 2) literature review, 3) methodology, 4) findings and discussion, and 5) conclusion.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Corruption is a global threat that hinders the wheel of development due to its negative consequences on all social and political institutions. Corruption can manifest in different forms and types, but the most popular type of corruption in governance is the financial corruption. According to Dike (2005), corruption is defined as the efforts to secure wealth or power through illegal means at the expense of the public. Corruption can also imply the misuse of the public power to achieve private benefits for certain people. In this regard, the financial corruption is defined as the misuse of the governments recourses in order to achieve personal gains (Svensson, 2005). The phenomenon of corruption is widespread across many countries, especially in developing nations where its detrimental consequences are more intense. Muslim-majority nations are affluent with vast natural resources, yet, the people within these countries are among the poorest in the world and that is by dint of corruption. Resources in these countries are mainly used to serve the private interests of narrow elites at the expense of the people and the development process in these countries (Benlahcene, 2017), and the situation in Sudan is no different, the country suffers the negative impact of financial corruption on many levels. Very often, countries pay

considerable attention to the fight against corruption and one of the useful means by which corruption can be curbed and brought to light is by using the media effectively. Newspapers are renowned for playing a crucial role in helping people resist corruption. They can also organize countrywide anti-corruption campaigns in order to educate people about corruption, develop awareness about its causes and suggest suitable solutions. Newspapers can also assist agencies in the investigation of corruption incidents (Sowunmi, Raufu, Oketokun, Salako, & Usifoh, 2010). Thus, newspapers can greatly contribute to the fight against corruption and promote a good governance (Odugbemi & Norris, 2010).

It is self-evident that the media plays a significant role in all societies. The primary responsibilities of the media and the press are to reflect and report what is going on in the society. Furthermore, the media serve as the means that connect individuals, governments, and the world at large (Bojanic & Madsen, 2014). Moreover, it is argued that, the fight against corruption takes place in several fronts, this includes: institutional reform, legislation and the media (Arnold & Lal, 2012). Media, particularly newspapers, is important in fighting corruption because of their sheer role as watchdogs, agenda setters, and gatekeepers. Newspapers pursue these responsibilities through framing of the discussion about corruption and offering coverage to the issues of corruption. Similarly, Sowunmi et al. (2010) noted that in the fight against corruption, media is significant and very crucial. Corroborating this perspective, Odugbemi and Norris (2010) established that media can contribute meaningfully to fight corruption as well as promote good governance. However, the rate of financial corruption in Sudan has been alarming for quite sometimes now, to the extent that the international community identifies Sudan as an extremely corrupt country (Martini, 2012). Unfortunately, in spite of the endemic financial corruption in Sudan, the involvement of the Sudanese media and journalists have been restricted by many obstacles which rendered their role ineffective and unable to contribute to the development process in the country.

In Sudan, there are many challenges faced by the journalists which are affecting the journalism industry, such as censorship restrictive laws, economic pressures, and press freedom (Deckert, 2012). Furthermore, Hamid and Ramdani (2020) found that journalists in Sudan face compound challenges in performing their watchdog role and in reporting financial corruption, these challenges include information withholding, lack of investigative training and imposing tax as. Additionally, the authors suggested that security threat, political pressure, economic pressure and transportation and facilities are the among the key environment factors that influence reporting financial corruption in Sudan (Hamid & Ramdani, 2020). Also, newspapers in Sudan experience huge financial losses due to low advertisements, frequent confiscations of printed issues of the newspapers, and unstable work environment for journalists (Doha Center, 2013). Evidence of this were apparent in June 2012 when the Sudanese media reported widely the anti-government protests and in response, the Sudanese government raised new taxes on all printing-related expenses, which proved another financial blow to the news and media houses.

Similarly, there have been several instances where private newspaper offices have been raided by security officers (FreedomHouse, 2015). According to Reports without Borders (2012), several newspapers have been closed down and journalists arrested for reporting on public sector corruption. In January 2012, for instance, two independent and opposition newspapers, Alwan and Rai al-Shaab, have been closed by security forces without explanation. Stapenhurst (2000) opined that media's effectiveness depends so much on their access to

information, freedom of expression, professionalism and investigative journalism (Rick, 2000). Furthermore, freedom of press contributes to improved accountability, good governance and desired economic development (FreedomHouse, 2015). According to International Media Support (2017), one of the major challenges faced by journalists and media houses in Sudan is lack of freedom of expression. Some white papers such as the one published by the International Media Support on the issues of media practices in Sudan revealed that Sudanese media houses are at risk of closure when their reports provoke or/and unveil the corrupt practices of the government.

In addition to the problem of freedom of journalists; media ownership and lack of legal protection for journalists are also among the critical challenges for journalists in reporting corruption issues in Sudan (Rick, 2000). Meanwhile, it is quite ironic that, the government which is responsible for clamping down the freedom of journalism in Sudan is as well the most benefactor of the media especially in terms of space and air time purchase. Invariably, the media gets their largest number of advertisements from government agencies and media houses in Sudan reward the government by ignoring any investigative journalism on the issues that could affect the government negatively (Gentzkow, Glaeser, & Goldin, 2006). Furthermore, control of information access is another critical factor to journalism independence. However, in the Sudanese context, sources of information that the media depend upon are often under the control of the ruling elite (Muzzatti & Featherstone, 2007). Access to government information in Sudan is limited and this hinders the press in performing their watchdog functions over the government, it also limits its social role as an important source of information or to raise the public awareness of corruption issues (Bojanic & Madsen, 2014; FreedomHouse, 2015).

Considering the numerous challenges faces by the media and newspapers in the context of Sudan pertaining the framing and reporting of financial corruption in the country. This study is set out to identify solutions for these challenges facing Sudanese journalists in reporting financial corruption. Using a qualitative approach, the study aims at providing practical solutions that could be useful in improving and optimizing the role of journalists in Sudan. This would contribute to the development of the media sector in the country and assist in overcoming the existing challenges faced by journalists.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, a qualitative approach was used to capture the different aspects of the issue being investigated. Qualitative research involves different methods, such as interpretative and naturalistic procedures for exploring a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In addition, qualitative research helps the researchers conduct studies in a normal setting and allows them to explore the phenomenon by examining words, reports, photos, and other materials (Creswell, 2007). Similarly, Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2013) noted that qualitative data analysis has a distinctive approach with the integration of analysis and explanation through the merging of data collection with data analysis. The present study used this approach to collect the relevant data and focused on the perceptions of journalists and editors on ways and means by which journalism in Sudan can overcome the current challenges.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 Sudanese journalists and editors across both governmental and private newspapers operating in Sudan. The selection of the sample for this study was based on a purposeful sampling procedure. Also, in this study, the participants belong to two groups (journalists and editors) from four Sudanese newspapers including government and private newspapers, namely: Aldar, Al Intibaha,

Assayha and Sudan Vision. According to Blair, Czaja, and Blair (2013), selecting participants of the study is one of the most important criteria when studying groups. Therefore, the study employed specific criteria for selecting the participants such as a minimum of two years of experience in editorial news writing.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews, the interview was chosen as a tool for data collection due to the nature of the study which requires the researchers to uncover the views and experiences of the participants. In keeping with this, the interview questions were designed based on the research objective of the study. Moreover, an interview protocol was developed to facilitate the interview sessions and to establish rapport with the participants. In addition, in order to obtain real and honest answers, the interviewees were informed about the objectives of the study prior to each interview. The participants were also informed about the confidentiality of the information obtained by the researchers. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder while notes were taken during interviews to complement the audio recording. Tape recording is one of the best devices to collect accurate copies of any interviews (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2011).

The collected data was transcribed and thematically analysed. Additionally, in order to simplify the process of storage, coding, analysing, and preparation of graphical representation of data, NVivo 8 was employed as data management software. NVivo 8 allows the process to be faster, accurate, and easy for researchers to organize and categorize the different codes and to identify relationships.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the perspectives and experiences that were expressed by the participants of this study has generated several themes which incorporate solutions for the challenges facing Sudanese journalists in reporting financial corruption. These solutions are based on the experiences of professional journalists and editors in their daily life work in the media arena in Sudan. The thematic analysis of interviews formed five main themes as the following:

1. Media institutions merging.
2. Legislation and press freedom.
3. Adequate training.
4. The usage of digital technology.
5. Collaboration among journalists.

Figure 3 displays the five themes deduced based on real-life experiences and views of the journalists and editors who took part in the current study. The following solutions are of crucial importance to the development of the press industry in Sudan.

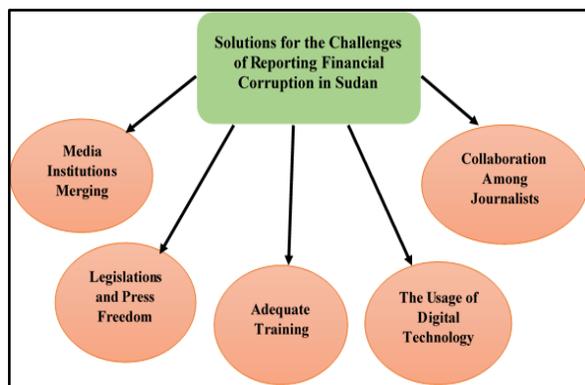


Figure 1. Solutions for the Challenges of Reporting Financial Corruption in Sudan

Press across Africa, especially in Sudan face a lot of challenges. For instance, government officials oppress journalists and scare them away from performing their responsibility in an effective manner. More so, the inability of the constitution to guarantee the right of journalists to perform their role as government watchdogs (Oladokun, 2010). Therefore, in view of this, there is an urgent need for a change. This was the main impetus for identifying possible solutions to the existent challenges and obstacles for the development of the press industry in Sudan.

#### Media Institutions Merging

This theme refers to the need for media and press establishments in Sudan to merge together in order to form more stable and successful organizations. Respondents of the study suggested that this is one of the approaches that can be followed by the media in Sudan that will allow it to face the current challenges. For instance, in developed nations such as the United States and European countries, a number of press organizations is clustered in one strong institution that is capable financially, technically, and professionally. This gives these organizations the advantage to withstand the financial challenges and enable them to resist economic pressures whether are exerted by the state, businessmen, companies, or advertisers.

The following views show the perspectives and observations of the participants on conglomeration of newspapers as part of the solutions to the development of press industry in Sudan. Supporting this view, informant 14 attested thus:

One of the most important solutions to the development of the press industry in Sudan, I propose, merging newspapers with each other because most of these newspapers find that the group of certain newspapers carry a specific message and believe in a certain theory and are similar in their ideas and theses. In addition, editorial texts newspapers that have a common denominator can be combined with some because newspapers like political parties converge and are similar to those between parties and those who demand the political parties to be merged. Also, newspapers that are based on one rule and one idea can be merged into one large newspaper, thus reducing expenditures and providing opportunities for comfortable economic conditions for journalists. In the eyes of the press, it is more important than politics which leads the society, because the press is the one that lights the way and at the same time is the one that provides free consultations even if we assume that, I was in the presidential palace or I have the opportunity to propose ministries and ministers do not protest to advisers because the press presents every day issues to consult and clarify the weakness of all ministers to be the role of consultation free of charge, and the journalist is more important than the political leader who run the public and governance issues. (Respondent14)

In this regard, respondent 17 also added the following: The number of current newspapers has become very large. I suggest that newspapers gather in institutions that become large and huge institutions that spend a lot of money on them and are trained by specialists at least to do their duty and role. The other side is required by the government to provide or exempt a large part of taxes and customs on print inputs in order to give it a chance to continue its life. If it continues, many newspapers may stop. (Respondent 17)

#### Legislations and Press Freedom

The second solution to the challenges of reporting financial corruption in Sudan is legislations and press freedom. In modern times, control of the media and the control of information movement have been a concern for successive governments in various countries of the world (Okwuchukwu, 2014). The most important problem facing the press in the Arab countries

including Sudan is that the press laws in these countries offer very little guarantees for freedom of the press, whereas the same laws provide tougher criminal penalties against the media (Duffy, 2014). According to Omu(2000), the problem of controlling the media is linked to the owners and interests of media institutions. This significantly hinders the media from performing their various functions. These laws usually include defamation laws, national unity, and the threat to national security.

The Interim National Constitution of 2005 guaranteed the protection of freedom of expression and freedom of the press under Article 39 and access to information for transparency, accountability, and efficiency. However, despite the previous constitutional provision and similar laws, access to information, in particular, public records and official documents, was not possible despite the Freedom of Information Act. The Sudanese government approved the Freedom of Information Act, which was also approved by the Sudanese Parliament in January 2015.

The following views are expressed by respondents regarding the legislation and press freedom as one of the solutions for press freedom. Expressing his view on this, respondent 4 stated that:

The press industry is linked to the political reality in the whole country and it is not a fragmented issue. The press and the economy mirror the political situation of what is in the country and there must be laws if the political reality of the country is not reformed and there is a law that supports democracy and freedom and accountability and a free democratic system through the rotation of power free and fair elections, which also affect the press. (Respondent 4)

Similarly, on this narrative, respondent 10 added the following statement:

The press industry in Sudan is not linked to the overall situation in the country. The press will not develop if there is no comprehensive and complete reform of the system in the Sudanese state of laws compatible with democracy, which guarantees freedom of the press and easy access to government information. The press industry needs to resort to the law and to codify the information. (Respondent 10)

As for respondent 6, it was suggested that the state should release the restrictive laws such as National Security Act, the press law, the criminal law, and the law on informatics. In this regard, respondent 6 said:

First, it is proposed to amend the laws on publishing so that the newspapers can carry out their duties. Many of the measures taken in dealing with these cases are arbitrary. Many of the cases are not officially followed by the press and publications. There are journalists who are against the state. The issue of law and legislation make the journalist keen to make a lot of effort. In order not to be exposed to economic, security or political pressure, I propose that the owners of these publishing institutions (publishers) should be completely away from them and support the experience that the publisher is similar to the journalist. For example, some newspapers are owned by a journalist. As for newspapers owned by businessmen, the board of directors in that newspaper, I suggest that the owner should be the founder only, hence it will be purely commercial. (Respondent 6)

In the same vein, respondent 8 stated that: Newspapers were not free enough and a space of freedom is simple. The newspapers are their censorship problem. Otherwise, there would have been a lot of news. Two years ago, the newspapers were dealing with corruption issues. But now they have gone down and do not deal with much of the

corruption cases except what is published in the report of the Office of the General Auditor. (Respondent 8)

Correspondingly, respondent 13 added that: Lifting the restrictions so that there will be a free press to address some of the issues and solutions is important because, it is not political, but livelihood of the people. Therefore, it is necessary for the State to provide production inputs and control through the Press Council. (Respondent 13)

Similarly, respondent 18 disclosed that:

The biggest burden is on the state to lift the state's legal hand on the press through various laws issued as the National Security Act, the press law, the criminal law and the law on informatics. Law through the Press Council supports the press by reducing taxes on the press. There must be sufficient freedom to cover issues in a positive manner. (Respondent 18)

### **Adequate Training**

The third theme encompasses solutions related to the training of journalists and editors. For example, three respondents 2, 7, and 18 explicitly noted to the importance and necessity of training journalists and editors in Sudan. Furthermore, these respondents observed that this will contribute significantly to the development of the press industry in Sudan. Based on the analysis of the interviews conducted with the respondents, it was confirmed that adequate training for journalists is one of the solutions to the development of the press industry in Sudan. For instance, respondent 2 highlighted the following:

In the light of the competition between printed press and the online press, we must be able to work hard to develop the press and provide a good working environment and should provide a better practicing and profession and adapting the conditions of journalists in general. (Respondent 2)

Supporting the statement of respondent 2, respondent 7 also suggested that:

Training and qualifying journalists with no doubt will have a positive impact on their journalistic work and enable the press establishment to achieve its goals in the best way, as well as implement journalists and provide financial stability for them. (Respondent 7)

Similarly, respondent 18 added:

Press institutions should be obliged to train journalists to be more prepared to meet the requirements of the profession. Every journalist must have a professional bias without any other affiliations. I think the state in the first, as well as owners of publishers and journalists should upgrade the level of journalist if they want to increase the journalists' training. If the State does not respond, press institutions should shoulder the responsibility. (Respondent 18)

### **The Usage of Digital Technology**

Another reported solution to the challenges of journalism in reporting financial corruption within Sudan is the use of digital technology. In the last decade, numerous tools, approaches, and devices have been deployed in the fight against corruption. The contest has been on all levels using diverse interventions by authorities and other stakeholders. However, in the current time, given the pervasive role of new digital technologies in our society, ICTs have become an important tool to fight corruption. In view of the seriousness of incidents of corruptions particularly in Africa, the need to imbibe the use of technology as a solution has become the trending concern.

Throughout the developed countries, the news comes using technological devices which are accelerating daily, and foreshadows the imminent spread between one party and

another, this situation requires systems that are capable of absorbing this rapid development of the removal of technical barriers. The existence of legislation in line with this huge development, such as the laws dealing with ownership and licensing, and the integration of the digital world and the internet have become necessary (Barnett, 2004). The statement below is expressed by respondent 5 regarding the use of digital technology as part of the solutions to the development of press industry in Sudan.

With the development of the press in Sudan, the press industry in Sudan is moving towards the best. That is, tens of years ago, newspapers relied more on paper, but now the press relies on electronic means. The press would prefer to expand in the electronic press because paper newspapers are on their way to extinction. Newspapers have to develop their websites and deal electronically in the production stages, such as conducting interviews and others. (Respondent 5).

Additionally, according to Silveira (2016) advances in technology have led to unique and speedy access to massive amounts of data on societies, the economy, and the environment. Likewise, Silveira (2016) noted that apart from serving a fundamental role for democracy, access to information and transparency are crucial apparatuses in the fight against corruption that lead to sincerity. Customarily it has been problematic to expose corruption due to huge amounts of data. However, digitalism and the acceptance of big data has led to new data management procedures to prevent fraud and abuse in the public sector. Similarly, Transparency International, (2018) described that as mobile phone usage and internet access around the world increase it is clear that technology is transforming society. The same goes for the fight against corruption.

#### Collaboration Among Journalists

A variety of perspectives were expressed by the respondents in regard to the need for collaboration among journalists in Sudan. Based on the views of respondents, collaboration among newspapers journalists can be of the solutions of the problems of journalism in the country. Collaborative effort among journalists has different forms, but the focus of this analysis was on printed newspaper such as the participation of journalists in one story or helping each other in a specific press coverage. Amditis and Halo (2017) defined cooperative journalism generally as the practice of performing press activities using a common approach. In the following statement, respondent 12 said thus:

When you have a better work environment, the performance of press will be better. Also, if there is a collaboration between the owner of the newspaper and the editor of the newspaper and the leadership of the newspaper and the newspaper and the sources of official or popular and the working environment itself whenever there is harmony and there is an understanding between the staff of the newspaper, the work is better and existing. (Respondent 12)

Collaboration of efforts, resources, and expertise among journalists in Sudan can offer many benefits for journalists and editors as well. This collaboration puts journalists in a position of strength in facing the various obstacles in investigating and reporting financial corruption in Sudan. Primarily, collaboration among journalists in reporting the different issues and problems within the countries can result in a more effective and reliable reports and press news.

#### CONCLUSION

The current study has investigated the solutions for the challenges facing Sudanese journalists in reporting financial corruption. The analysis of the study which was based on the views and experiences of journalists has generated five main

practical solutions that can be applied to tackle the challenges of reporting financial corruption in Sudan. The findings suggested that media institutions merging, legislations and press freedom, adequate training, the usage of digital technology, and collaboration among journalists. These solutions are derived from the lived experiences of Sudanese journalists in their day-to-day professional lives. The insights generated from this study can be of practical application for both journalists, media owners, and policy makers in Sudan.

Despite the fact that these findings are restricted to the context of Sudan, it can be of important relevance to other African and Arab countries of similar social, political, and economic conditions. Thus, the study contributes to the efforts of media development in African and Arab countries. This study also recommends that further research need to be conducted on several issues that are related to media. For instance, researchers need to examine the relationship between the wider mass media and politics. Also, Further researches are needed to understand the role of the newspapers in influencing the Sudanese public opinion, especially the impact of the press on critical issues, such as the effect of the financial corruption on public opinion in the Sudanese society.

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