



National Anti-Corruption Conference

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Investigative Journalism Can Shine a Light into Dark Places

Good investigative journalism is essential in holding power accountable. Many have said this before me, and many have said it better. Walter Lippman is one who, nearly a century ago, equated great journalism to the “beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another, out of darkness and into vision”.

Surely no one would argue the importance of investigative journalism in promoting a corruption-free environment? And without media, how else will corrupt acts be brought to light and to the attention of the public?

But media cannot be a full partner in the fight against corruption if viewed with suspicion and hostility and denied access to the information they need to do justice to their work; and there are both deficiencies and dangers that jeopardize its good practice in fighting it.

Many speakers will emphasise it over the course of this conference, but it needs to be said again and again until it hits home: Corruption affects poor and marginalized communities worst and has devastating consequences on the development agenda by undermining growth and poverty reduction and also impeding good governance..

The African Union Convention on Corruption to which we are signatory, acknowledges the need for full participation of media and civil society in fighting this scourge and the importance of an “environment that will enable civil society and media to hold governments to the highest levels of transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs”.

The foreword to the 2011 Uganda Media Review on Media and Corruption, sums it up well: “Media’s role is to raise awareness of the causes, effects and remedies, including investigating and reporting corruption. It must also educate people about their rights. By informing citizens of the types of corruption within their social, political and economic systems to be able to fight it more effectively.”

I’m sure most would agree with this statement. It is difficult enough to dig deep to expose corruption in all its manifestations – in public sector or private - but almost impossible if people don’t really

know what corruption is or why they should care.

The more civil society, voters and consumers are properly informed of graft involving public monies, the less likely public wealth will be squandered, which in turn will have a positive socio-economic impact and prevent further wrong-doing.

Several African countries have anti-corruption commissions, but they are often compromised by a lack of political will to make them work, lack independence, are under-resourced and under-funded and therefore stand accused of focusing mainly on the small stuff. It is clear, in Namibia, that even with the efforts of media and the Anti Corruption Commission, only the tip of the iceberg of corruption, fast becoming an endemic problem, is exposed.

There remain many constraints on reporting on corruption effectively.

As the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), a cross border global investigative organisation responsible for the recent Swiss Leaks expose, also established, there are limited newsroom budgets and lack of resources to carry out investigations; a shortage of or small staff complements and poor remuneration for many journalists mean they often succumb to the very evils the media should be fighting. A lack of cooperation by public officials, who hide behind secrecy and criminal defamation laws, add to the constraints. More and better access to journalism training, which is necessary to increase independence, capacity and professionalism in the media, as well as to combat self-censorship, is also deficient in many countries, including our own.

So how then can media be empowered to expose corruption?

Investigative journalists, many struggling to source information, especially in countries where freedom of information laws do not exist, all contribute to power being held to account and to good governance by exposing inefficiencies, theft and abuse of power. In the process ordinary people becoming more empowered with the knowledge and the understanding to shape society for the better.

Freedom of speech and the media as well as access to information are non-negotiables for an environment in which investigative journalism can truly flourish. This must apply equally to both traditional and online journalists as well as citizens who are finding their own voices through social media. Namibia is widely regarded as a country with the most free media in Africa, a great positive. We are further encouraged by a 'new' approach by our head of state to promote transparent, open and accountable government. It is still too early to judge whether this pledge will be sustained, or whether the promises will fizzle out in time. While President Hage Geingob recently took the important step of declaring his own assets, this is hopefully the start to what should be an ongoing and regular process that will include other top politicians and civil servants.

In order to report effectively on corruption an **enabling environment** needs to support free speech, press freedom and independent press. Access to information is key to transparency and public accountability, and in places without freedom of information laws, it is a daunting, if not impossible task. Namibia does not yet have a freedom of information law, although we understand there is a draft in the making, and it would certainly complement and facilitate the work of media in exposing corruption. But right now journalists see one of the major challenges as officials who are mostly resistant to making information freely available. Unless there is political will and a mechanism to compel the release of information, then corruption will not be curbed.

A zero tolerance approach to corruption requires that media across the board be encouraged, not deterred, from probing it. A recent statement by the Minister of Information that 'state' media should

be government ‘mouthpieces’ is intimidatory and not helpful in motivating journalists to commit to ensuring public officials are held to account.

Investigations tend to be more vigorous in countries where access to information laws exist. In South Africa the media uses these laws extensively to pry information from the state and the private sector. This has resulted in big investigations and even subsequent policy and other changes. A notable probe into corruption there is the Nkandla case involving President Jacob Zuma and the state’s unauthorized expenditure on his private home. Although it hasn’t yet resulted in him “paying back the money” as many citizens demand, it has certainly helped shine the public spotlight on the abuse of public resources.

Without access laws, draconian regulations are often used by governments to prevent scrutiny, thus limiting media’s capacity to exercise its public accountability function. (It is significant that Namibia, for example, which is regarded by Freedom House and Reporters sans Frontiers as ‘most free’ in terms of media in Africa, ranks very low in terms of an access to information survey conducted by the African Platform on Access to Information (APAI). In other words, there is too much secrecy).

Journalist **safety** is also an absolute precondition for freedom of speech and the media and needs to be protected. There must be no impunity when they are killed or harmed. Journalists cannot do their work professionally and do the best of their ability, when their lives and safety are under threat.

Given compliance with the above-mentioned scenario for an enabling environment in which investigative journalism can thrive, it is important also to look at ways and means in which it can be enhanced.

In Africa there’s been a move towards the creation of specialist investigation units. While all journalism should be investigative in nature, to deepen and enhance professionalism, special skills and expertise are often necessary for ‘dig-deeper’, complex and often time-consuming reporting.

Recognition of this need has resulted in the creation of specialized units at several newspapers in southern Africa, as well as intent to work more collaboratively rather than ‘go it alone’ given small staff components and limited budgets. There are several such examples.

Already the ICIJ, which I mentioned earlier, has done a number of investigations with global impact and these include African journalists. This kind of journalism is expensive and also risky and the ICIJ has done a number of big investigations into corruption, environmental exposes, poverty and health issues and accountability.

It is important for the media to get **public support** and earn the trust of their communities so that civil society is also equally engaged in fighting corruption. In Namibia media exposure of a scandal involving the loss of 30 million from the Social Security Commission in a botched deal, has dragged on for years and some of those responsible are currently before the courts, even if it is many years later. Again, this and other cases of high-level corruption, has helped conscientise Namibians about the effect of corruption on development.

Some steps that can be taken almost immediately to facilitate the role of media in fighting corruption and to ensure a zero tolerance approach include the following:

1. The adoption of a freedom of information law after a process of widespread consultation with media and other stakeholders. In the meantime a directive to civil servants to be more open and accommodating of requests for information, would be helpful.
2. A clear commitment to transparent and open government, not just by the President, but all state players, by declaring their own interests, and also to unequivocally recognize the vital role of media in fighting the scourge.
3. Public awareness campaigns to ensure the full engagement of civil society, including protection of sources and whistleblowers, to ensure that people are not afraid to report corrupt acts.
4. A clear recognition by government that the fight against corruption requires a full and equal partnership with both media and civil society.

More investment in journalism training is also required to ensure enhanced standards of professionalism in the media, adherence to codes of conduct and support for self-regulation.

The more we shine a light on corruption – not just at conferences like this one but on a continual basis – and if media is enabled to do so in an environment that encourages full exposure of the scourge, the less likely corruption will be able to flourish in dark places.

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