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Linking Up Actors to Strengthen Ecosystems: Emerging Results and Lessons from the Big Bet On Nigeria Program's Media & Journalism Portfolio

Introduction

Corruption affects Nigerians' lives in many ways, [playing a role](#) in poor public service delivery, accentuating inequality, and driving social instability, among many other challenges. Addressing corruption is, therefore, an urgent priority for Nigeria and its partners, like the MacArthur Foundation. In 2016, the Foundation launched its [Big Bet On Nigeria](#) Program, to support Nigerian-led efforts to improve transparency, accountability, and participation, strengthen the overarching [accountability ecosystem](#), and ultimately, reduce corruption. In pursuit of these goals, the Program has awarded more than $150 million in grants across four areas, or subsystems: social norms and behavior change; criminal justice reform; advocacy and collaboration (referred to as "Joinbodi"); and media and journalism.[1]

> ### *MAJ Grantmaking Approaches at a Glance*
> 1. **Skill building:** training and knowledge sharing opportunities for MAJ grantees and others in the media ecosystem
> 2. **Collaboration:** On Nigeria's **cohort model** facilitates regular opportunities for MAJ grantees' collective learning and action, and includes access to resources, information, and networks to strengthen corruption-related reporting, as well as resource and expertise exchanges on corruption-related journalism. The Cohort model also encourages collaboration with grantees in other cohorts.
> 3. **GESI:** production of corruption-related journalism relevant to historically disadvantaged groups, including in local languages.

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[1] In the program's first phase, from 2016-2020, it also made grants to support electricity distribution, school nutrition programming, and universal education. New grants made from 2020 have focused on the subsystems described.

On Nigeria's media and journalism (MAJ) portfolio has made more than 60 grants (totaling roughly $40 million) to media organizations working throughout Nigeria to support the production of high quality, corruption-related media and journalism, strengthen the uptake and amplification of that journalism, and raise consistent pressure on government officials and other decisionmakers to take action against corruption. Grants have typically applied one or more of three strategic approaches (see box).

As On Nigeria's [Evaluation and Learning Partner](#), our team at EnCompass has accompanied Foundation staff and grantees since 2016. We carry out targeted evaluation activities to deliver the just-in-time evidence that the Foundation and grantees need to learn, adapt, and achieve results. Since 2020, we have produced six in-depth studies, or learning products, that explore the MAJ portfolio.[2]

In this blog, we synthesize emerging results across these studies and share the evidence on the MAJ portfolio's contribution to the media subsystem and the broader accountability ecosystem. We also offer a couple of lessons for others seeking to support independent media and journalism, and strengthen transparency, accountability, and participation, in Nigeria and elsewhere.

The Evidence to Date: Results

The MAJ-focused learning products collectively reflect thousands of individual data points. When considering all of the underlying evidence together, three overarching results emerge:

1. **Media monitoring data suggest that the quantity of corruption-related reporting in Nigeria has grown considerably since 2016. On Nigeria grantees – a significant presence in the Nigerian media landscape – contribute a substantial amount of corruption-related reporting and investigative journalism.**

Our [evaluation](#) of On Nigeria's first four years of programming found that the volume of corruption-related reporting increased significantly between 2016 and 2019, and – as explained in detail in *Learning Brief: Media Monitoring (2016-2023)*[3] – remained prevalent in the 2020s (though adjustments to our media monitoring methodology beginning in 2021 prohibit definitive year on year comparisons).

On Nigeria grantees have played an important role in the proliferation of reporting on corruption problems and anticorruption successes. In 2021 and 2022, for example, grantees produced roughly

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[2] These include: *[Learning Brief: Quality of Investigative Reporting (2016-2020](#)*), *[Learning Brief: Media Monitoring (2021) and Quality of Investigative Reporting (2016-2021)](#)*, *[Social Network Analysis Baseline Report](#)*, *[Learning Brief: Amplifying Investigative Reporting,](#)* *[Case Study: Investigative Reporting Change Stories,](#)* and *Learning Brief: Media Monitoring (2016-2023) (forthcoming).*

[3] NOTE: This brief will be publicly available in autumn 2024.

20 percent of the online articles in our media monitoring sample.[4] In 2023, they produced 33 percent (Exhibit 1). 2021-2023 data also highlights that, in addition to producing corruption-related reporting, On Nigeria grantees are consistently among the most frequently mentioned anticorruption actors in the media. This aligns with evidence from the 2022 *Social Network Analysis Baseline Report,* in which MAJ grantees showed up as significant players in the overall accountability ecosystem in Nigeria.

Exhibit 1. Proportion of TV and radio segments, and grantee/non-grantee online articles in the media monitoring sample, 2021-2023, identified by corruption-related filter terms[5]
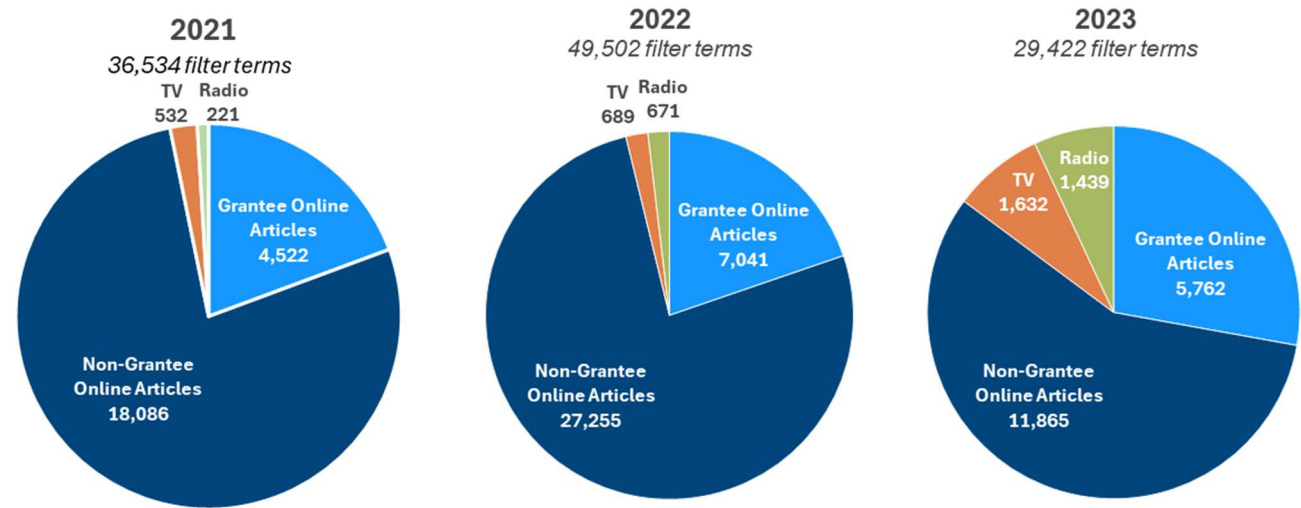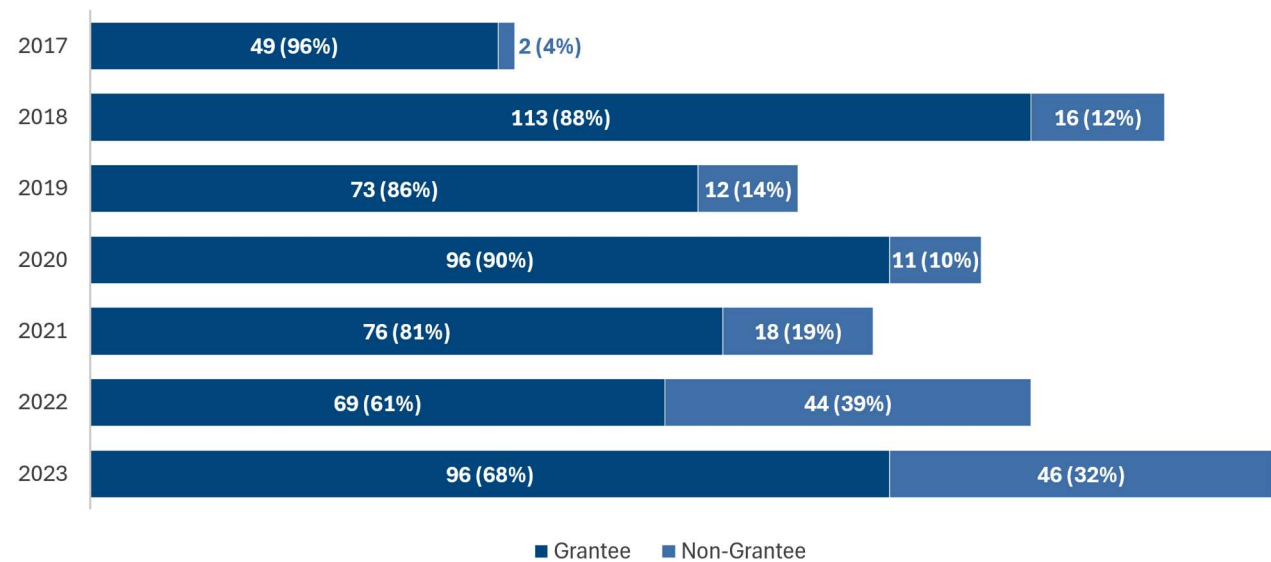

Similar trends emerge with respect to the quantity of investigative reporting. Between 2016 and 2023, the proportion of investigative articles in our sample grew from a baseline of less than 1 percent (2016) to as high as nine percent (2018), before stabilizing around seven percent in 2023. No standards exist to define the ideal ratio of investigative reporting relative to other reporting, but this trend suggests that Nigerian media organizations have strengthened their ability to produce investigative reporting – an important outcome in the On Nigeria Theory of Change.

Grantees account for the majority of investigative reports identified, but the proportion of investigative reports produced by non-grantees has grown considerably, from as little as four percent of the total (2017) to more than 30 percent (2022 and 2023) (Exhibit 2).

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[4] EnCompass works with partners at Playspread Nigeria to monitor a nationally representative sample of TV and radio stations that broadcast news in a variety of languages throughout Nigeria, and leverages to the Pulsar Trac platform to monitor the online articles produced by a nationally representative cross section of news organizations. We use filter terms and keywords to capture corruption-related reporting from these sources, and then pull a randomized subsample of corruption-related online articles for our analysis of investigative reporting.

[5] The drop in the total number of articles between 2022 and 2023 may be due to updates in the Boolean search terms used to collect articles. The EL Partner made these updates in April 2023 after an audit of incoming data found that too many irrelevant articles were being collected.

Exhibit 2. Quantity of investigative articles (2017–2023) by grantee and non-grantee organizations (n = 721)

Year	Grantee	Non-Grantee
2017	49 (96%)	2 (4%)
2018	113 (88%)	16 (12%)
2019	73 (86%)	12 (14%)
2020	96 (90%)	11 (10%)
2021	76 (81%)	18 (19%)
2022	69 (61%)	44 (39%)
2023	96 (68%)	46 (32%)

■ Grantee ■ Non-Grantee

The quality of investigative reporting improved in the early years of On Nigeria, during which grantees were consistently producing higher quality articles than non-grantees, but has declined slightly over time, and the gap between grantee articles and non-grantee articles has narrowed. This suggests that non grantees are catching up to grantees in terms of quality, and may reflect the burgeoning success of On Nigeria grantees' efforts to build the skills of other journalists and media organizations.

2. **Our in-depth research has surfaced cases in which On Nigeria's media work, and in particular, investigative reporting, has contributed to improvements in citizen awareness and engagement on issues related to corruption and accountability. Improvements are especially notable at local and state levels.**

As reported in *Case Study: Investigative Reporting Change Stories* and *Learning Brief: Amplifying Investigative Reporting,* there is compelling evidence that investigative reporting and sustained amplification efforts have broadened citizens' and communities' (including historically disadvantaged groups like women and youth) awareness of corruption, and driven them to take action against corrupt businesses and officials. In some cases, this work involved collaborations of multiple grantees, some of whom connected at regular networking and learning events curated by the Foundation. Exhibit 3 presents a few examples of reporting and amplification encouraging citizen action in specific locations.

Exhibit 3. Examples of MAJ-Supported Citizen Engagement

Ogun State	**Advocacy for Better Working Conditions** A grantee supported an undercover investigation into labor practices at a local quarry, and partnered with another MAJ grantee to amplify the reporting via radio town halls. These efforts broadened local citizens', communities', and unions' awareness of unsafe labor conditions. These groups then mobilized and demanded that the National Human Rights

		Commission (NHRC) and state officials hold the quarry owners accountable for violating workplace regulations.
Kano State	**Citizen Demands for Accountability**	An On Nigeria subgrantee investigated the alleged theft of funds at a local university, and eventually found that a university official had stolen hundreds of millions of naira. Other media organizations translated and amplified the story on the radio in local languages, including Hausa. After sustained amplification efforts, students and staff, as well as members of the public, advocated for a formal government investigation.
Oyo State	**Community Led Monitoring of Public Service Delivery**	One journalist's reporting on a snakebite treatment center that lacked necessary medical equipment inspired community members to take, share, and repeatedly amplify photos of the center on social media, and to eventually reach out to local officials to demand they address the problem.
FCT	**Agitating for an End to Extortion**	Citizens in Abuja used a grantee's reporting on extortion practices in the Electricity Distribution Commission as evidence when submitting complaints to the Commission, and demanded accountability for culpable officials.
Borno State	**Women-Led Activism and Amplification**	In Borno State, a grantee's citizen journalism-focused work encouraged historically disadvantaged women in the Knifar movement to produce and amplify their own reporting on human rights violations, and advocate for better conditions in internally displaced persons camps, as well as for the release of their illegally detained family members.

3. **There are numerous cases in which On Nigeria-supported investigative reporting and amplification efforts have contributed to emerging improvements in government responsiveness.**

The Accountability Research Center recently proposed a framework for assessing government reactions to advocacy for public accountability (see box). Applying the RRA Framework to the MAJ evidence from On Nigeria makes clear that there are many examples in which the work of grantees and their partners has contributed to improvements in government response and responsiveness.

> ***Response, Responsiveness, and Accountable Responsiveness Framework***
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> According to the RRA Framework, when governments:
>   1. **Respond** to citizen advocacy, they might simply acknowledge receipt of complaints, or promise to address the identified issues.
>   2. Are **responsive**, they follow through on promises made.
>   3. Demonstrate **accountable responsiveness**, they enact lasting institutional change that enables citizens to leverage formal channels to address and solve their concerns in the longer term.

For instance, *Learning Brief: Amplifying Investigative Reporting* summarizes thirty-six cases in which government officials **responded** to grantees' investigative reporting and amplification efforts on a range of issues, from bribery to voter registration fraud. Responses included, for example, launching investigations, agreeing to fire corrupt employees, and promising to make repairs at a malfunctioning hydroelectric plant.

In other cases, officials went further. In the example from Ogun State captured in *Case Study: Investigative Reporting Change Stories*, the NHRC not only committed to an investigation of the unsafe labor conditions animating the MAJ grantees'

joined up investigative reporting and amplification efforts, but local government officials in this case were **responsive**, and ultimately sanctioned the company that owned the mine in question. As a result, miners received much needed personal protective equipment. The evidence suggests, however, that more is needed to sustain and broaden similar protections at other mines.

Experiences from the MAJ portfolio makes clear that, despite the many examples of emerging response and responsiveness to date, achieving wide ranging **accountable responsiveness,** and transforming the relationship between citizens and the state to sustainably reduce corruption is – as anticipated in the On Nigeria Theory of Change – a long-term effort that will require action from a wide variety of actors, including many outside of the media sector. The work of MAJ grantees, and the broader experience of On Nigeria, suggests the journey towards accountability is underway in many places, but consolidating and scaling these achievements throughout Nigeria is an ongoing process.

Emerging Lessons

The evidence presented above, and explored in more depth in the MAJ studies referenced throughout this post, demonstrate that for media work to make a difference against corruption, not only do journalists and organizations need the capacity to produce significant amounts of high-quality reporting on issues that matter to citizens and communities. Their stories also need to reach affected stakeholders, sometimes repeatedly, and do so in formats that suit them. Only then is corruption-related reporting likely to get amplified and support the inclusive citizen action and follow up that can drive government response, responsiveness, and ultimately, accountable responsiveness. In other words, if media and journalism work is to really lead to anticorruption, we need to understand the media sector itself as a subsystem integrated into the overarching accountability ecosystem. This is perhaps especially the case in a context that, like Nigeria, is incredibly diverse in languages and audiences.

What does it look like to apply a subsystem approach to media and journalism work? What should other grantmakers and media champions take from the experience of On Nigeria and its MAJ grantees? We'd suggest two lessons are especially important:

First, *strategically support diverse, complementary actors throughout the media subsystem*. On

Nigeria's MAJ portfolio includes many different types of media organizations – from well-established outfits to start ups – working in and across geographies all over Nigeria (and beyond) in a variety of languages. Some grantees produce newspapers. Others focus on online journalism, or work in radio, TV, or even social media. Some seek to create content for broad audiences, and others have specific niches. Others are not content producers at all, but focus instead on training journalists, or on picking up on and amplifying corruption-related reporting. By strategically supporting different actors - many of whom have complementary skills and focus areas – the On Nigeria MAJ portfolio has contributed to the emergence of a vibrant, prolific media subsystem with considerable amounts of corruption-related reporting, and within which media actors are better positioned to meet the needs of the country's diverse communities.

Individual actors, however, are not enough. Lone organizations working in isolation are unlikely to make a difference in the fight against corruption. In fact, many of On Nigeria's MAJ successes have emerged as groups throughout the media subsystem – journalists, news organizations, amplification specialists, and communities themselves – have worked together to overcome barriers, from resource limitations to intimidation and government stonewalling. **On Nigeria's cohort model** and emphasis on **coordination** and **collaboration** has helped bring MAJ grantees together at regular intervals, share knowledge, contacts, lessons, and consider complementarities and collective action – including, in some instances, with grantees in other cohorts. This work took time and effort, as grantees slowly built trust and learned how to cooperate with each other in a competitive media environment, but eventually contributed to at least some of the successes summarized in this post. This suggests that, in addition to supporting individual actors, media champions should also explicitly ***encourage, and facilitate long term, collective coordination, learning, and action opportunities that regularly bring together actors throughout the media subsystem and the broader accountability ecosystem***.

On Nigeria's MAJ partners have faced many challenges – harassment, brain drain, ongoing insecurity, and revenue generation – and will face many more in the coming years. Whether and how Nigerian media organizations and their supporters will be able to consolidate and build on the successes seen under On Nigeria remains an open question (this is something we'll explore further in the final evaluation of the program in 2025). Clearly, a vibrant, prolific independent media and journalism subsystem alone is not *sufficient* for creating an overarching accountability ecosystem in which anticorruption champions are consistently able to work together to hold governments accountable. But a strong media subsystem is *necessary* for building and sustaining the momentum needed to consolidate and sustain accountability gains in the longer term. And the experience of On Nigeria's MAJ portfolio suggests that simultaneously strengthening the capacities of diverse media subsystem actors while also facilitating ongoing collaborative learning and action can help drive results within both that subsystem and the overall accountability ecosystem.

For more on On Nigeria, and the evidence on the MAJ portfolio, visit the [Foundation's learning library](#) (more learning products are coming soon, as will a final evaluation by December 2025). And in the meantime, let us know what you think – how do these lessons resonate with your experiences in the media and journalism and accountability work, in Nigeria and elsewhere? What do you find surprising? And what other insights might you suggest?