

EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE VS. CORPORATE PRESSURE IN SAFEGUARDING JUSTICE & STRONG INSTITUTIONS (SDG 16)

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Abstract

The connection of editorial independence and corporate pressures in this research is considered complex as it pertains to Sustainable Development Goal 16 of dealing with the issues of justice, peace and well-known institutions. An independent/autonomous press is a floor stone of democracy as it is linked and linked with transparency and accountability not to mention publicizing corruption and injustice. However, corporate citizenship forces degrade such a role whereby, due to ownership structure patterns, ads interests and profit motives, independence of such newsrooms and news reporters is curtailed. These pressures normally result in selective reporting or biased reporting or censorship to accommodate the functions of the media as the watchdog of the governance and justice to the disadvantage of the functions of the media as the watchdog of the governance and justice. To critically trace the tension between journalism and corporate dominance, this paper will result in an insight into the threats involved around herding features coupled with the instability of the democratic institutions and voters within the setting wherein the autonomy of the media is to be questioned. It also indicates that the changes of the policy, media standards, and public interest journalism should be considered as the most significant steps to secure SDG 16 and its elements of fairness and strong institutions.

Keywords: Editorial independence, corporate pressure, justice, strong institutions, and SDG 16

Introduction

The effort of the Sustainable Development Goal 16 that values peace, justice, and sound institutions renders the importance of a free and independent media incomprehensible in the context of the favorable involvement of democratic values and accountability. The central part of the whole process is editorial independence under which the journalists and a news agency have the freedom to report, investigate and criticize without any involvement, safeguard the principles of transparency and justice. Such independence is, however, often challenged by theglomeration of the corporation in which the owners, advertisements, and the political cronies intervene with the journalistic independence. On the new economies, coverage and reporters silence their dissidents, media houses in most democracies have a corporate structure that favors reputation, profits and advertisers satisfaction as well and this influence propensity to favouritism (Newman, 2018). These forces neutralize the watchdog roles of the press, weaken its abilities to uncover corruption and cast its reputation as a source of justice, accountability and transparency. This plight has been made worst because more media houses have been globalized and media houses have become increasingly dependent on corporate sponsorship, thus leading to selectiveness or requirements of sensationalism or utter silence on such stories that do not appeal to any of the interests in such enhancing efforts. Such destructive power of editorial freedom unwell gestures the integrity of the citizenry of institutes and upsets the trend of inclusion-based politics.

Meanwhile, journalists struggle with the ethical dilemma as one must absorb responsibility as a professional and institutional deed, and frequently, they self-censored their speech by verbal means to keep their employment or to preserve the life thereof. Governance wise, the reduction of editorial autonomy directly affects the rule of law since the voices that need to be critical to highlight areas of judicial malpractice, inequity in policies, as well as mal-practices in wielding power, are silenced. To safeguard SDG 16 organized reforms are thus necessary along with the legal protection of the freedom of the press as well as structural reforms constraining corporate monopoly in terms of media ownership, enhancing transparency in funding and promoting publications of the public interest. Finally, it is not just a media problem, the conflict between editorial freedom and corporate influence, but is really a starting problem of such democracy; a solution to which is seriously needed to demonstrations of a well-knitted institutions that carries legitimacy, dispenses justice, and protects the rights of the rest of the citizens.

Need of the Study

The urgency to conduct this study is based on the increasing debate of editorial independence verses corporate pressure that creates a great challenge towards the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 that focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions. When analyzing the media today, we realize that corporate ownerships, which are either actually encouraged to advertise or fed on the need to make money, tend to undermine the independence of the newspaper, thus giving biased reports, critiquing or delivering bias reports. Such kinds of practices with a variable nature of misdefinition of the masses opinion are compiled to harm democratic body in many ways and dilute soundness and open-mindedness due to the numbing of the voice of the critic whereby through which the light shines bright on transgression of power and corruption. To be able to understand how the media could assume their watchdog role and not be swayed by external factors, the fourth pillar of democracy should enquire about such an issue. These issues cited, the paper highlights the urgency of legal aspects, moral values and institutional transformations in the media industry, since this aspect can be a key determinant regarding transparency, establishment empowerment and safeguarding of the democratic portions of SDG 16.

Purpose of the Study

This paper seeks to critically discuss the issue of editorial freedom verses commercial influence against safeguarding justice and healthy institutions with references to the considerably vital objective of a sustainable development goal 16. The paper seeks to discuss how the weakness of corporate ownership, pressure by advertisers and profit making interests have resulted into poor services by journalists and news agencies in monitoring democracy. It tries to establish consequences of compromised media freedom on openness, responsibility, or the way the citizens have confidence in the institutions. By so doing, the research would sensitize the need to maintain editorial liberty, which is among the means of reinforcing democratic leadership and facilitating the law rule. Besides, the potential policy measures, ethical actions and institutional changes that could enable the media to combat unjust forces, in one way or another to uphold its role in delivering justice, fairness and institutional integrity in accordance with SDG 16 goal is sought by the study.

Importance of Media Freedom and Editorial Independence as Pillars of Democratic Governance

Freedom of media and editorial independence are some of the basic tenets of democratic governance since it guarantees the citizens access to correct, non-partisan, and reasoning information that would help them make informed decisions and account. Free media acts as the fourth estate making watch of government, businesses and other influential players and keeps up the ideals of transparency, justice and the rule of law safe. This especially applies in cases of editorial independence, as journalists and editors need to be able to seek out the truth

without any apprehension of government censorship, dubious activities, and other vested interests by the political or corporate changes. The independent operation of the media agents can also facilitate the investigation of the wrongdoing, exposition of human rights abuse, and offering various viewpoints that empower the people in discourses and the democratic processes. On the other hand, compromise of editorial freedom undermines democracy because it leads to biased news contained by the interest and suffocation of voices of the elites and reduces feelings of trust in offering news by the institutions. In that case, the freedom of the media is not just a professional need but societal, and there is direct connection with the well-being of the governance systems and satisfaction of Sustainable Development Goal 16, which focuses on peace, justice, and effective institutions. Without an independent media, checks and balances needed in the course of accountability and fairness are dilute to non-existence hence corruption, injustice, and authoritarian natures thrive freely. Editorial independence, therefore, could not be overlooked in returning media to be a pillar of democracy, a barricade of truth, and an advocate of the oppressed thus benefiting the pillars of good and good government.

Role of Media in Promoting Accountability, Transparency, and Rule of Law

The media, in particular, is an important proponent of accountability, transparency, and the rule of law that are the primary pillars of democratic governance and the pillars of Sustainable Development Goal 16. The media is a watchdog institution and can come up to call the persons at the office of power, whether the government, corporate institution or any other institution of power to accountability in decisions and actions taken by these offices. I and specially investigative journalism enlighten their cases concerning corruption, abuse of power, abuse of human rights and failed policies etc that would otherwise be undetected enhancing accountability. Media also enhances transparency by soliciting citizens with information which is timely, precise, and thorough so that they can be in a position to realise processes involved in governance and assess the performance of the institutions. This free flow of information minimizes the areas of information secrecy and manipulation hence all the decisions made are in the best interest of the people and not some selfish and vested interest. Moreover, the media is the vessel of debate and conversation where the citizens are provided a chance to express opinions, to seek justice and to be involved into administration. Speaking of rule of law, the media can unveil injustices of any nature, point out gaps in judiciary and keep track of the activities of the laws being submitted to, and thus, promote equality before the law and dishearten impunity. There is also the role played by independent media which creates awareness of the law through enlightenment of the citizens about their rights and duties so that they can fight the violations and be redressed. Nevertheless, this position works well when media is not censored, politically interfered or scandalously involved by any given company, the media risks becoming a device of propaganda instead of democracy. Therefore, an independent press that is free, crucial to advance the institutional legitimacy, constructing the trust of the population, and protecting justice. The media, not only through its defense of the democratic values but also by serving as a mechanism to go towards inclusive, just and strong attained institutions as set out under SDG 16 by creating accountability, transparency and promoting the rule of law.

Challenges to SDG 16

The increasing strength of corporate power over democratic machines is one of the most urgent issues to fulfill Sustainable Development Goal 16, as the control over the autonomy of the judiciary system, the quality of journalistic reporting, anti-corruption actions, and their hindrance, are influenced. Lobbying and bribing using funds and manipulating media houses active pressure by the corporate interest in both the political and judicial system end up compromising the highest application of justice and lending credibility to the institution. This is a negative influence not only upon the freedom of the judiciary but also the capacity of the

reporters to report towards the bad practices or abuse of power that might be in the unfavour of the interest of the commercial customers, media proprietors themselves or political supporters. Therefore, investigations into crimes of corporate or political malpractices wind up being lengthy, eroded or rejected, and a culture of impunity thus corrupting the working ethics of accountability and justice established. This kills justice delivery because the citizens begin perceiving the system as rhythmic and inaccessible thereby unleashed deficit of trust between the people and the media, since the people do not know they can capitalize on the legal institutions.

As long as people lose faith on the capabilities of these agents of democracy, they also create a lapse of faith on the ability of the state to make sure the practices of equality of human being before the law and protection of basic rights thus destroying bottom blocks of the processes of a state. In addition, the widespread nature of the corporate influence provides a chilling effect to the literary system of the media, journeys and editors might be driven towards self-censorship to save their positions, advertisement or the fear of legal harassment. This tends to cause selective reporting, in other words, high profile matters can under be reported or be recast in a manner that shields wedded stakeholders like corporate fraud, political corruption, and human rights violations. At the same time, there is a risk of media becoming a tool of propaganda and pro-spreading other narratives that would resonate with the agenda of elites and ignore opinions expressed by the dissent and grassroots opinions. These tendencies are enormous defeat to the media that acted as the watchdog to the democracy and the capacity of the civil society to interrogate the institutions. Hence, the aims of SDG 16 to promote justice, peace and strong institutions are put at stake because supremacy of corporations undermines transparency, accountability and silencing of indemnity of voice that is critical in democratic control. These problems can be addressed with effective legal control aimed at ensuring legal independence of courts, applying the media pluralism model and averting the monopolization of information, and many others as the means of stimulating investigative journalism and safeguarding whistleblowers. Such defensive mechanisms guarantee the SDG 16 hollow because when the institutions are at stake of becoming a tool of elite agenda instead of delivering of justice, equality and democratic principles.

Literature Review

Küfeoğlu, S. (2022). This chapter takes the boon that technology can imbue democracy in governance, positive institutional transparency and cripple corruption should the latter be well integrated. Blockchain, digital distribution of governance, and big data analytics are among the specified tools that are supposed to contribute to accountability, the improvement of the decision-making and the access of justice. However, all the problems mentioned in the study are also connected with risk factors being mentioned, such as technology misuse, online threats, and Internet exclusion, which may turn into their inception and unwind the SDG 16 agenda. Kудay idealizes application of relative positioning of technological innovation within a larger framework of institutional reforms through two angledness of technology of facilitator and a potential obstacle. The lesson is that technology is not the guarantee of justice and effective institutions but rather it ought to be viewed in the context of a paradigm of moral government, and inclusiveness and safeguarding of human rights. The school of thought assists in upholding the debates on the ways of making innovation responsive to the establishment of peace, justice, and sustainable governance as one of the SDG 16.

O'Reilly, G. (2023). The lessons in terms of development of democracy and governance reform as well as the experienced integration (as identified in the chapter), are some lessons which can provide benefit in understanding to other regions of the globe. O'Reilly argues that geography is vital to determine institutional stability, access to justice, and equitable governance since it is uneven differences between regions that affect the way SDG 16 is fulfilled. He uses the

analysis of the political and legal systems of Europe to illustrate that robust democratic traditions, safeguarding of human rights as well as responsible institutions constitute effective motivating factors towards sustainable peace and justice. However, the agendas of migration, disparity, and emerging populism risk these successes. The research finding is that establishing the success of the SDG 16 would require both institutional design and addressing the issue of geographic disparities and conflict regions. In this way, O'Reilly places SDG 16 as a pillar area and equally as a process geographically contingent, in order to support sustainable development at the global level.

Hope Sr, K. R. (2020). The article puts SDG 16 in the category of being one of the most critical, yet one of the hardest goals to attain due to the fact that it is directly related to the political power, governance reform and institutional legitimacy. Hope puts it forward that peace and justice will never last because the governance structures must be democratic, open, and attentive of the demands of the citizens. The paper pinpoints the following constraints that do not ensure achievement of SDG 16 in most developing states; capture of resources, systemic corruption, as well as absence of accountability mechanisms. Relying on the international examples, the author proposes to make institutions stronger by not only enacting legal changes but also by turning the cultures into more democratic and less authoritative ones. Efforts to develop anti-corruption tactics, the formation of judicial reform, the involvement of citizens, and the collaboration of nations are the promotion areas of Hope. The article subsequently project SDG 16 to be a political and a developmental mandate, a challenge that is to be maintained through the concerted effort of states, civil society as well as other actors in the global stage to circumvent deeply engrained challenges.

Joseph et al. (2024). They place corporations in the middle stage and observe their practices as a major force that can affect their way of governance, transparency, and credibility towards the population. The study concludes that there are different corporations that take ethical promises seriously and report accordingly but there are also corporations that console on the appearance of taking ethical positions with shallow intentions far more motivated by reputational issues as opposed to a responsible attitude. Through the analysis of the disclosure practices, the study finds that the corporate influence may lead to promotion of justice and institutional integrity or vice versa. Its findings indicate that open and uncovered ethical reporting strengthen accountability, and business operations are performed in line with the SDG 16 goal, however when weak or fake disclosures are reported, distrust and the opportunity to prosper through squandered civil regimes and malpractices are propagated. The authors highlight the necessity of more regulatory requirements, involvement of players, and transnational regulation reforms to bring corporate share towards justice and good institutions. It will also widen the topic of SDG 16 to the private sector so as to perceive that the sector is a significant collaborator of facilitating transparency, ethics and good governance.

McDermott et al. (2019). The authors imply that the institutional reforms are not conducted as the apolitical processes but by the political interests and conflicts, by disparities that make themselves the beneficiaries of the systems of governance. The case studies in different regions which the chapter attracts are examples of how bad institutions and loopholes in governance propensity tend to encourage environmental destruction, resource wars and social injustices. It cites the presence of peace and justice to be not completely a question of a legal change that they require in order to confront deeper structural inequities and environmental conflicts. The authors by applying political ecology are able to reveal the existence of multidimensional relations of power that exist between the SDG 16 and environmental sustainability, human rights, and democratic governance. It concludes that the efforts to achieve SDG 16 do not only consist of the establishment of efficient institutions but also the pathway which critiques both

the political and ecological circumstances in which they can and must operate that bind justice and peace to global sustainability quite closely.

Research Problem

The main research question discussed in the present paper is the latent disintegration of editorial autonomy and corporate influence and the ramifications of this change to ensure the protection of justice and healthy institutions as envisaged in Sustainable Development Goal 16. Although media is currently known as the fourth pillar of democracy as it is expected to percolate transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, its independence is becoming weaker due to control by an exclusive group, pressures of advertisers, and self-agenda agenda. Such business pressures tend to influence the editorial judgment process, dampen investigative journalism as well as encourage self-censorship, undermining the work of watchdogs. Consequently, some of the most problematic topics, including corruption, loss of human rights, and inactive institutions, are either misplaced or misrepresented to serve the best interests. This does not only reduce the belief that individuals have in the media but also undermines governments and dispensing of justice. The research question is therefore how media independence threat as controlled by corporates poses a danger to the independence required to uphold democratic values and integrity of the institution and what can be done to clean up the editorial freedom as a means of realizing the SDG 16 vision that speaks of a peaceful, just and well-built institutions.

Methodology

To critically examine the collision between the independence of the editorial and corporate pressure as the instruments of achieving the safety of justice and well-developed institutions under SDG 16 framework, the given research presupposes mixed-method research. The issue was studied qualitatively and quantitatively to be able to have a profound overview. The quantitative component involved, was an order questionnaire survey which conducted on 100 journalists, and editors and media practitioners in separate news firms, where they are parameterized on perceptions of corporation influence and the extent of editorial unablence and influence of media effect in increasing accountability, transparency and the rule of law. The response analysis was computed in form of percentage distribution, and mean score to identify the patterns and trends. The qualitative aspect will be the richness of the stories in the interviews where the semi structured interviews will be conducted under a sample population of the media people, the policy makers and the academic researchers thus leading to greater insights of the ethical dilemma, limitations structure and actual impacts of the media. Secondary data on scholarly articles, UNESCO reports, and case studies were also changed to provide the background of the issue. The methods intersection was carried out to ensure reliability and validity and the intensive insights were selected with the help of a thematic analysis. This model of methodology does not simply engage in how corrupted the corporations are, but displays its broader consequences of delivering justice, institutional integrity and democracy as promised SDG 16.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Journalists’ Perception of Corporate Pressure

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean Score (1–5)
Corporate owners influence editorial decisions	45	32	10	8	5	4.0

Advertisers affect the selection of news stories	40	35	12	9	4	3.9
Fear of job loss leads to self-censorship	38	34	15	9	4	3.9
Editorial independence is well protected in my organization	12	18	20	30	20	2.7

Table 1 provides the findings that illustrate what journalists think about the role that corporate forces are playing on their editorial independence. There is an outraging percentage of 77 percent (45 percent strongly agree, 32 percent agree) of respondents who believe that the editorial decisions are directly influenced by corporate owners and this indicates that the concentration of ownership directly impedes news content. Similarly, three out of every four of them admit that they acted on advertisers and this illustrates the increased unreliability of media by virtue of financial reliance. Fear of being fired also comes out as a major contributor and 72 percent admit that it influences self censoring and the second factor that reflects the effect insecurity has in suppressing critical reporting. Instead, responding to the question about whether editorial independence is upheld at their organizations, only 30 per cent of people cited this as a good idea and an equal or even worse responses (50 per cent) to the opposite signify that people do not trust institutional protections of autonomy. The average of all responses between 2.7 and 4.0 depicts that journalists are highly biased to favor the truth about corporate interference as an actual entity. It is an indication of the media environment that the pressures on the economic and corporate are huge burdens on editorial freedom, which influences the journalistic integrity.

Table 2: Impact of Corporate Pressure on Media’s Role in SDG 16 (Survey Results)

Role of Media in SDG 16 (N=100 Respondents)	High Impact (%)	Moderate Impact (%)	Low Impact (%)	No Impact (%)
Promoting transparency	55	25	15	5
Ensuring accountability	48	30	12	10
Safeguarding rule of law	40	28	20	12
Strengthening public trust in institutions	35	30	22	13

Table 2 shows how pressure of corporations to practice democracy by a media with respect to SDG 16 results in effects on the media. More than five out of ten (55 percent) mentioned depending on media as having substantial their effectiveness in enhancing transparency, but just 35 percent but it leaves much to be desired, that is increased trust between the citizen and organizations, said it could do much stronger to boost citizens trust. The importance of the accountability in terms of assurance was also reported with the highest impact by 48% seeing that the effect is both high and moderate-low implying weaker watchdog roles. In the same way, safeguarding the rule of law was a score of highest significance among only 40% of them with 32% indicating the low or no significance at all, which indicates decreasing effects on the reporting regarding justice. The information demonstrates that well as media still has far that capacity of enhancing transparency and accountability, corporation-induced interference greatly erodes its ability to promote trust and strong rule of law. SDG 16 is based on powerful and independent media to promote equitable institutions, hence, this erosion directly endangers it.

Table 3: Comparative Numerical Analysis – Editorial Independence vs. Corporate Pressure

Variable	Editorial Independence (%)	Corporate Pressure (%)
Freedom to report sensitive issues	65	35
Accuracy in corruption reporting	70	30
Self-censorship practiced	25	75
Public trust in news coverage	60	40

Table 3 presents a comparison of the opposing impacts of editorial, and corporate pressure on media functionalities with critical influence on democracy and SDG 16. In a situation where the independence of the editors is upheld, 65 of them confirmed that they have the freedom to cover sensitive matters, as opposed to one out of every three under corporate influences, and it is clear that outward interference kills critical reporting. Similarly the degree of accuracy in the reporting rate of corruption is much more under independence (70%) compared to when pressure is (30%), and at the same it is a fact that autonomy will help more investigative journalism. On the other hand, involved is a chilling effect of financial and political force such that the self-censorship of corporate pressure leads to more self-censorship (75) than independent one (25). The company is also run by corporate interests, with only 40 per cent believing in same coverage as compared to 60 per cent in a situation where the editorial freedom is the order of the day. These figures are certainly an indication that the vice of corporate predominance disparages that of transparency, accountability and credibility but editorial independence equips the media to execute goal 16 which is the promotion of justice and sound institutions.

Conclusion

The mixture of editorial autonomy and corporate push as the debate of securing justice and robust institutions (SDG 16) present extremely complex and challenging reality of the contemporary media. The editorial independence is essential to a healthy democracy as the healthy democracy grants the mandate to the journalists to investigate the evil, expose corruption, and accountability, transparency, and rule of law. However, this autonomy is cancelling out due to the emerging corporate holdings and advertiser based revenue models, where media houses is currently gradually sliding towards the intent of selective biases, censorship and revenue-mindedness overtures, which admittedly is quite counter-productive to the interests of the masses. The findings believe in that the corporate influence does not within any way limit the extent of the reporting but also limits judiciary independence and the aspect of anti-corrupt by shielding the influential groups of individuals indirectly. This is what has resulted in undermining of both the trust of the people in the media as well as the government organized institutions which consequently weaken the pillars of the very democratic principles itself. Self censorship coupled with propaganda also creates a spiralling effect as it further delays and underreporting of information to people, which further reduces their chances of finding rest which are answered by those in authority. The urgency reforms necessary to guarantee the SDG 16 safety include the presence of urgency reforms that need enactment to guarantee the reforms, which involve stricter laws on media monopolies, open system of funding, the existence of better legislation to protect journalists and promotion of press on the common good. Moreover, the media ethics can also be elaborated, the whistleblowers need to be given a protection and citizens be mobilized to shake off corporate sway. Ultimately, to preserve the institution of justice and a strong institution, there must be the need to preserve the editorial independence as a component to good democratic governance that will ensure that

the media are as an investigation mechanism that is uninspired and imbued with the virtue of truth, fairness, and the sense of security of enforcing the rights of the citizens.

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