

# **JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (JPIR)**

## **MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS**

**OMOLASOYE, Isaac Adewale<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The Nigerian media operates in a complex democratic landscape where it is expected to function as a watchdog, public forum, and catalyst for accountability. Historically rooted in anti-colonial activism, the media continues to play a vital role in shaping public opinion and monitoring governance. However, its effectiveness is consistently tested by a challenging environment that includes legal restrictions, economic vulnerabilities, and socio-political pressures, similar to patterns observed in other transitioning democracies like India and Hungary. This study employs a qualitative analysis based on a comprehensive review of existing literature, policy documents, and case studies of media performance during key political events. The approach synthesizes insights from academic publications, reports from professional media bodies, and comparative international examples to evaluate the interplay between media practices and democratic processes in Nigeria. The analysis reveals that the Nigerian media faces significant constraints, including repressive legislation, economic instability, and the proliferation of misinformation, which collectively hinder its democratic role. Despite these challenges, the media has demonstrated remarkable resilience through investigative journalism, digital innovation, and increased civic engagement. These adaptive strategies highlight its potential to foster transparency and public participation even under difficult conditions. The study concludes that while the Nigerian media is hampered by substantial obstacles, it remains an indispensable pillar of the country's democracy. Strengthening its capacity will require systemic reforms, enhanced professionalism, and greater protection for press freedom. By addressing these issues, Nigeria can harness the media's full potential to support democratic consolidation and sustainable development.*

*Keywords: Media Freedom, Democratic Consolidation, Digital Transformation, Regulatory Frameworks, Public Accountability.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Broadcasting, Information and Media Studies Faculty of Communication and Media Studies Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo  
[ia.omolasoye@acu.edu.ng](mailto:ia.omolasoye@acu.edu.ng); [isaacomolasoye38@gmail.com](mailto:isaacomolasoye38@gmail.com)

## **Introduction**

A free and vibrant press is universally recognized as a cornerstone of a functioning democracy, acting as a watchdog on power, a forum for public debate, and a vehicle for an informed citizenry (Siebert et al., 1956). In Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and a key democracy, the media has historically played a pivotal role, from the anti-colonial struggles to the pro-democracy movement against military rule. However, the transition to a democratic system since 1999 has revealed a complex and often contradictory relationship between media practice and democratic consolidation. While the Nigerian media is among the most vocal and prolific on the continent, its capacity to fulfill its democratic mandate is constantly challenged by a confluence of formidable obstacles. This article argues that the Nigerian media operates within a pressured environment where its democratic prospects are persistently tested by legal repression, economic fragility, and socio-political fragmentation, yet it continues to find avenues for resilience and impact.

The Nigerian experience mirrors global patterns where democracies, both emerging and established, grapple with the power of media. In nations like Hungary, democratic backsliding has been accompanied by the strategic stifling of independent media (Bajomi-Lázár, 2022), while in India, the world's largest

democracy, the media landscape is marked by pronounced political polarization and ownership concentration (Sen, 2021). Nigeria's own context is uniquely shaped by its ethno-religious diversity, economic challenges, and a political culture where power is often jealously guarded. This has created an environment where, despite constitutional guarantees of free expression, journalists face harassment through laws like the Cybercrime Act, and media houses struggle with economic sustainability and political capture (Ogbondah, 2021). This introduction sets the stage for a critical examination of these challenges, while also exploring the resilient opportunities that digital technology and investigative journalism present for reinforcing democracy in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Review**

This study is built upon two central concepts that require clear definition, media and democracy. In this context, "media" encompasses both traditional institutions such as the print and broadcast outlets, and the expanding digital ecosystem of online news platforms, social media, and blogs that have become fundamental to public discourse in Nigeria. "Democracy" is conceptualized not merely as periodic elections but as a system of governance characterized by accountable institutions, active citizen participation, protected civil liberties, and robust public deliberation (Dahl, 1998). The core relationship under

examination is how the media as an intermediary institution facilitates or impedes the realization of these democratic ideals in the Nigerian context. Key operational concepts include media freedom (the absence of constraints on expression), media pluralism (the diversity of voices and perspectives), and democratic consolidation (the process by which democratic norms become institutionalized and stable).

### **Empirical Review**

Existing scholarship on Nigeria presents a media landscape marked by both resilience and vulnerability. Historical studies document the press's courageous role as an anti-colonial voice and its resistance against military dictatorship, establishing a tradition of activism (Omu, 1978). Contemporary research, however, reveals a more complex picture. Studies highlight how the media in the Fourth Republic operates under significant duress, including the use of legal instruments like the Cybercrime Act to silence critics and the problem of political-economic capture where ownership influences content (Adebanwi, 2016; Ogbondah, 2021).

A growing body of work focuses on the digital transition. Researchers note that social media has empowered citizen journalism and mobilization, as seen in movements like #EndSARS, but has also accelerated the spread of disinformation and hate speech, undermining informed

public discourse (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). This dualism is not unique to Nigeria, similar patterns of digital-enabled civic engagement coexisting with pervasive misinformation are evident in other large democracies like India and Brazil (Sen, 2021). The literature collectively identifies a critical gap between the media's potential to strengthen democracy and the realities of its operational environment, characterized by legal harassment, economic precarity, and socio-political polarization.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To analyze this complex relationship, this study is anchored by two interrelated theoretical frameworks, the Public Sphere theory and Gatekeeping theory.

Jürgen Habermas's concept of the Public Sphere (1989) provides a normative ideal for the media's role in democracy. It envisions a space where private citizens can freely assemble to discuss societal issues, form public opinion, and shape political action, independent of state or corporate control. This theory is highly relevant as it sets a benchmark against which the Nigerian media environment can be evaluated. It drives the research by prompting key questions, "To what extent does the Nigerian media facilitate a rational-critical public debate?", "How do ethnic divisions and political interference fragment this sphere?". The theory provides the lens to understand the media's failure to often operate as a

neutral arena and its transformation into a contested space where various interests struggle for dominance.

Complementing this, Gatekeeping Theory (White, 1950) offers a mechanistic explanation for how information flows from events to the public. It originally focused on the editorial choices of individual journalists but has evolved to account for the multitude of forces that influence what news gets published and how it is framed. This theory is crucial for this study because it moves beyond the ideal of the public sphere to explain the practical realities of news production in Nigeria. It drives the analysis by focusing on the "gates" that control information. These are not just editors but also political patrons, economic pressures, regulatory bodies, and algorithmic curation on digital platforms. The theory helps explain how and why certain stories are promoted or suppressed, revealing the power dynamics that distort the public sphere. It is particularly relevant for analyzing issues like media ownership influence ("captured gates") and the challenges of gatekeeping in an era of information abundance on social media. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework. The Public Sphere theory establishes the democratic ideal, while Gatekeeping theory offers the analytical tools to deconstruct the forces that prevent Nigeria from fully achieving it. They guide the investigation into the specific challenges the media faces and

inform the assessment of its prospects for fulfilling its democratic mandate.

### **Historical Context: The Nigerian Media from Colonial Era to the Fourth Republic**

Understanding the contemporary landscape of the Nigerian media requires a journey through its historical evolution, a narrative marked by a persistent struggle for freedom against shifting forms of control. The Nigerian press was born not as a passive observer but as an active participant in the nation's political destiny. Its foundational character was forged in the fires of anti-colonial resistance, with pioneering newspapers like Lagos Weekly Record and West African Pilot under Nnamdi Azikiwe explicitly challenging British colonial rule and agitating for self-determination (Omu, 1978). This activist origin established a powerful precedent, embedding within the Nigerian media's DNA a self-perception as a watchdog and a voice for the oppressed, a trait that would define its operations for decades to come.

Following independence in 1960, the media's role transformed from confronting a colonial power to holding a nascent national government accountable. However, this transition was quickly fraught with tension. The civilian governments of the First Republic soon exhibited intolerance for critical

reporting, attempting to manipulate media outlets along the emerging ethnic and regional fault lines. This period of fragile democracy was abruptly ended by a military coup in 1966, ushering in a long era of dictatorship that would severely test the media's resilience. Under military rule, the press became the primary bastion of opposition, facing brutal repression, censorship, and the imprisonment of journalists. The infamous Decree 4 of 1984 under General Buhari's regime, which criminalized the publication of any report that embarrassed the government, epitomized this oppressive environment (Adebanwi, 2016). The assassination of renowned journalist Dele Giwa in 1986 via a parcel bomb remains the most chilling symbol of the extreme dangers faced by the press during this period, a stark contrast to the more subtle but equally potent pressures faced in other post-colonial contexts like Apartheid South Africa.

The return to democratic governance in 1999, marking the Fourth Republic, was met with immense optimism for media freedom. The new constitution guaranteed freedom of expression, and a proliferation of private broadcast and print outlets seemed to signal a new dawn. Yet, the legacy of history proved heavy. The media found itself navigating a new set of challenges reminiscent of the past, albeit in civilian garb. The state retained potent legal instruments, often relics of the military era, to regulate and sanction the media. Furthermore, the

democratization of the political space coincided with the rise of powerful economic interests, leading to media capture by political actors and business oligarchs, a phenomenon also observed in transitioning democracies like Hungary (Bajomi-Lázár, 2022). Thus, the historical journey from colonial agitator to military-era resistance fighter has culminated in a Fourth Republic media that is vibrant and numerous but remains locked in a continuous struggle to fulfill its democratic mandate against evolving forms of constraint.

### **Analysis of Key Challenges**

The Nigerian media's pursuit of its democratic mandate is severely constrained by a complex web of interconnected challenges that stifle its independence, professionalism, and effectiveness. A primary obstacle is the enduring framework of repressive legal and regulatory instruments. Despite constitutional guarantees of free expression, the government frequently wields laws inherited from the military era, such as the Cybercrime Act, to harass, intimidate, and prosecute journalists for critical reporting. Regulatory bodies like the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) often function not as impartial arbiters but as extensions of executive power, imposing fines and sanctions that threaten the financial viability of outspoken media houses (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). This creates a pervasive climate of

self-censorship, where editors and journalists preemptively avoid sensitive topics to avoid punitive measures, mirroring tactics used in other emerging democracies like Tanzania to silence dissent.

Compounding this legal pressure is the profound issue of political and economic capture. The high cost of operating media enterprises, coupled with a weak advertising market, makes outlets vulnerable to financial influence from wealthy politicians and business elites who acquire ownership stakes to control narratives and serve their interests. This often translates into biased coverage, the suppression of negative stories, and the promotion of partisan agendas, fundamentally corrupting the media's role as a neutral platform (Ogbondah, 2021). The widespread practice of "brown envelope" journalism, where cash incentives are offered to influence news reporting, further erodes professional ethics and public trust from within.

Furthermore, the Nigerian media operates within a deeply fractured socio-cultural context. The nation's sharp ethnic and religious divisions are often reflected and amplified by sections of the press, which sometimes abandon objectivity to serve as mouthpieces for particular identity groups. This polarization fosters hate speech, exacerbates social tensions, and undermines the media's capacity to serve as a unifying public sphere for rational-national discourse, a challenge also

evident in the media landscapes of India and Kenya (Sen, 2021).

Finally, the digital age has introduced the formidable challenge of the misinformation ecosystem. The rapid rise of social media and online news platforms has democratized information sharing but has also vastly accelerated the spread of falsehoods, incitement, and manipulated content. This digital anarchy, often fueled by political actors, overwhelms the fact-checking capacities of traditional journalism, confusing the public and eroding the very concept of shared factual reality, thereby deepening political cynicism and threatening the informed citizenry essential for a healthy democracy (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019).

### **Role of Media in Promoting Democratic Values and Electoral Process**

Despite operating under significant constraints, the Nigerian media performs indispensable functions that are vital for the nurturing and sustenance of democratic values and the integrity of the electoral process. Its most critical role is that of a watchdog, scrutinizing the conduct of government officials and exposing corruption and abuse of power. Investigative journalism units within platforms like Premium Times and The Cable have broken major stories that have forced public accountability and sparked

national debates, thereby fulfilling the media's classic function of holding power to account, a role as crucial in Nigeria as it is in more established democracies like the United States (Schudson, 2008).

During electoral periods, the media's role becomes even more pronounced. It serves as the primary platform for political discourse, providing candidates and parties with a avenue to present their manifestos to the electorate. Through organized political debates, interviews, and analytical programs, the media helps to frame the salient issues of the campaign, moving beyond personality politics to focus on policy and governance. This function, however, is often compromised by the challenges of bias and ownership influence, creating an uneven playing field that does not always reflect the neutrality seen in systems like the United Kingdom's BBC during elections.

Furthermore, the media is a crucial agent for voter education and enlightenment. It disseminates essential information about voting procedures, polling locations, and electoral rights, helping to foster an informed citizenry capable of participating meaningfully in the democratic process. In the face of rampant disinformation, the fact-checking initiatives of several Nigerian media organizations have become a frontline defense against falsehoods, working to preserve the integrity of the information ecosystem upon which free and fair

elections depend. This aligns with global efforts by organizations like First Draft News to combat electoral misinformation.

Ultimately, by providing a forum for diverse voices and opinions though often imperfect, the media facilitates the formation of public opinion and promotes the core democratic values of transparency, accountability, and civic participation. Its ability to amplify the concerns of ordinary citizens and mediate between the government and the governed remains a fundamental pillar of Nigeria's democratic experiment, even as it strives to overcome the forces that seek to undermine its credibility and independence.

### **Identification of Prospects and Opportunities**

Amidst the significant challenges, the Nigerian media landscape reveals resilient prospects and emerging opportunities that offer pathways for reinforcing its democratic role. The most transformative development has been the digital revolution and the rise of online journalism. The proliferation of digital-native news platforms like Premium Times, The Cable, and SaharaReporters has created new spaces for investigative reporting that often circumvents traditional constraints. These platforms have leveraged social media to reach younger, tech-savvy audiences and break stories that trigger national accountability

processes, demonstrating a capacity for impact similar to digital media innovations in Kenya and South Africa (Wasserman, 2018).

Technology has empowered citizen journalism and civic engagement. Social media platforms have become vital tools for grassroots mobilization and real-time reporting, as evidenced by movements like #EndSARS where citizens bypassed traditional media gatekeepers to document events and organize protests. This democratization of content creation has fostered a more participatory media environment, though it simultaneously amplifies challenges of information verification.

The growing establishment of independent fact-checking initiatives represents another promising development. Organizations like Dubawa Africa have emerged as crucial institutions dedicated to verifying claims and debunking misinformation, thereby enhancing the overall credibility of the information ecosystem. These efforts align with global best practices in media literacy and have become essential partners for traditional news outlets in maintaining factual integrity.

There is also increasing momentum toward professionalization and ethical renewal within the industry. Institutions like the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism and the Nigerian Guild of Editors have intensified efforts

to promote training, ethical standards, and recognition of excellence in journalism. This internal strengthening is crucial for building institutional resilience against external pressures and corruption.

Finally, continued advocacy for legal and policy reform by civil society organizations and media rights groups keeps the issue of press freedom on the national agenda. Strategic litigation challenging repressive laws and ongoing dialogue with regulatory bodies represent sustained efforts to create a more enabling environment for media operations, drawing inspiration from successful media freedom campaigns in other Commonwealth nations.

### Synthesizing the Paradox

The Nigerian media landscape presents a profound paradox that encapsulates both the resilience and fragility of the nation's democracy. On one hand, the media functions as a vibrant arena of public discourse, employing digital tools to enhance civic engagement and accountability. On the other, it remains constrained by structural vulnerabilities that limit its capacity to fulfill its democratic role. This tension between agency and constraint reflects a broader struggle within Nigeria's political system, where democratic aspirations coexist with authoritarian legacies.

The coexistence of robust civic expression and persistent institutional weakness represents a central paradox. Digital platforms have enabled unprecedented civic mobilization, as seen during the #EndSARS protests, where social media facilitated real-time documentation and transnational solidarity. Yet, this technological empowerment exists alongside deeply entrenched challenges: regulatory repression, economic precarity, and politicized ownership. This duality mirrors patterns observed in other transitional democracies, such as India, where digital media innovation thrives alongside rising censorship and polarization (Sen, 2021).

Theoretical frameworks help illuminate this tension. Habermas's concept of the public sphere (1989) envisions media as a space for rational-critical debate, yet Nigeria's mediated public sphere is often fragmented along ethnic and religious lines, undermining its unifying potential. Similarly, while gatekeeping theory traditionally focuses on editorial curation, in Nigeria, gatekeeping is significantly influenced by external political and economic pressures, distorting the flow of information and limiting pluralism.

This synthesis reveals that the media's democratic prospects are not predetermined but contingent on ongoing negotiations between resistance and adaptation. The resilience of investigative journalism and fact-checking initiatives

demonstrates the media's ability to self-correct and innovate in response to challenges. However, without structural reforms such as legal frameworks that genuinely protect press freedom, sustainable funding models, and greater editorial independence, the media's potential to deepen democracy will remain unevenly realized.

Ultimately, the Nigerian media embodies both the promise and peril of the country's democratic project. Its struggles and adaptations reflect a society grappling with the complexities of modernization, pluralism, and governance. The path forward requires not only strengthening the media itself but also fostering a broader democratic culture that values transparency, accountability, and civic participation.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the complex relationship between media and democracy in Nigeria, revealing a landscape characterized by both significant challenges and resilient prospects. The analysis demonstrates that while the media possesses the potential to act as a vital pillar of democratic consolidation promoting accountability, facilitating public discourse, and strengthening electoral processes, its effectiveness is substantially constrained by structural, legal, and socio-economic limitations. The Nigerian media operates

within a paradoxical environment where digital expansion and innovative journalism coexist with repressive regulations, economic precarity, and persistent threats to professional independence. This duality reflects broader tensions within Nigeria's democratic system, where democratic aspirations confront institutional weaknesses and authoritarian legacies.

The findings indicate that the media's democratic role is not predetermined but contingent on ongoing negotiations between civil society, state institutions, and media practitioners. The resilience demonstrated through investigative journalism, fact-checking initiatives, and digital adaptation offers hope for progressive development. However, without substantive reforms addressing fundamental constraints, the media's capacity to fulfill its democratic functions will remain compromised. The Nigerian experience mirrors patterns observed in other emerging democracies where media freedom advances incrementally through strategic advocacy and institutional strengthening.

Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the media's democratic contributions:

For governmental institutions, there is an urgent need to reform restrictive media laws in alignment with international press freedom standards. This should include

revising the Cybercrime Act and National Broadcasting Code to prevent their misuse against journalists, while strengthening legal protections for whistleblowers and investigative reporters. Such reforms would bring Nigeria closer to media governance models practiced in more established democracies like Ghana and South Africa.

Media organizations should prioritize institutional sustainability through diversified revenue models that reduce dependence on politically-influenced advertising. Investment in professional development programs, enhanced fact-checking capabilities, and explicit editorial independence policies would strengthen ethical standards and public trust. Establishing cross-media collaborations for investigative projects could pool resources and reduce individual institutional risks.

Civil society organizations and international partners should expand support for media literacy programs that empower citizens to critically engage with digital content. Continued advocacy for transparent media ownership structures and protection of journalists' rights remains essential. International bodies could facilitate knowledge exchange programs allowing Nigerian media professionals to learn from comparative experiences in countries that have successfully navigated democratic media transitions.

Ultimately, strengthening the media-democracy nexus in Nigeria requires coordinated action across multiple sectors to create an environment where journalists can operate freely, citizens can access reliable information, and democratic institutions can benefit from rigorous public scrutiny. The future of Nigerian democracy depends significantly on nurturing a media ecosystem that balances freedom with responsibility, innovation with integrity, and critique with constructive engagement.

## **References**

- Adebanwi, W. (2016). *Authority stealing: Anti-corruption war and democratic politics in post-military Nigeria*. Carolina Academic Press.  
<https://carolinaacademicpress.com/product/authority-stealing/>
- Bajomi-Lázár, P. (2022). The Hungarian media system in the twenty-first century: From a democratic to an authoritarian regime. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(4), 793–811.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221077426>
- Dahl, R. A. (1998). *On democracy*. Yale University Press.  
<https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300084559/on-democracy/>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT Press.  
<https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262581080/the-structural-transformation-of-the-public-sphere/>
- Ogbondah, C. W. (2021). *Media and democracy in Africa: Mutual political bedfellows or implacable arch-foes?* Routledge.  
<https://www.routledge.com/Media-and-Democracy-in-Africa-Mutual-Political-Bedfellows-or-Implacable-Arch-Foes/Ogbondah/p/book/9780367670350>
- Omu, F. I. A. (1978). *Press and politics in Nigeria, 1880-1937*. Longman.  
<https://www.worldcat.org/title/press-and-politics-in-nigeria-1880-1937/oclc/4489559>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2023). 2023 World Press Freedom Index.  
<https://rsf.org/en/index>
- Sen, A. (2021). Polarization and the press: The changing nature of India's media landscape. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(3), 145–159.  
<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/polarization-and-the-press-the-changing-nature-of-indias-media-landscape/>

Wasserman, H., & Madrid-Morales, D. (2019). An exploratory study of fake news and media trust in nine African countries. *Digital Journalism*, 7(1), 16–34.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1493940>

White, D. M. (1950). The “gate keeper”: A case study in the selection of news. *Journalism Quarterly*, 27(4), 383–390.  
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/107769905002700403>