

PERFORMANCE OF THE NIGERIAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA AS THE FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM

EZEAGU, PATIENCE NDIDIAMAKA

Department of Mass Communication
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
ndidiamaka49@gmail.com

&

EZEAH GREGORY (Prof)

Mass Communication Department
University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

The concept of the media as the fourth estate of the realm presumes that the media perform a watchdog role over government and other institutions by promoting accountability, transparency, and informed citizen participation. This study evaluated the extent to which the Nigerian mainstream media continue to fulfil this essential democratic responsibility. The study precisely examined the watchdog role of the media in promoting accountability and identified the challenges affecting their performance as the Fourth Estate. A qualitative descriptive research design was adopted, using in-depth interviews as the instrument of data collection. The population of the study comprised fifteen (15) journalists selected from mainstream media organizations in Nigeria through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using qualitative thematic content analysis. The study was anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory and the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press. Findings revealed that Nigerian mainstream media continue to contribute to democratic governance through investigative reporting and the exposure of corruption and failures in governance. However, their effectiveness is constrained by political interference, ownership influence, economic pressures, and digital disruption. The study concluded that although the media remain central to democratic accountability, strengthening editorial independence, professional ethics, and institutional support is crucial for enhancing their watchdog role.

Keywords: Evaluation, Mainstream Media, Fourth Estate, Watchdog, Accountability.

Introduction

The mass media plays a critical role in modern democratic societies. The concept of the “fourth estate” refers to the media's role as a watchdog of not only the government but also other institutions, complementing the age long traditional structure - three levels or estates of power: the legislature, executive, and judiciary ((McQuail, 2010).).

The media monitors the activities of those in power and informs the citizens about matters of public interest. World over, the media plays a central role in promoting transparency, facilitating public debate, and safeguarding democratic values (McQuail, 2010).

Through investigative journalism and critical reporting, the media serves as a middle man between the government and the public, helping citizens to make intelligent and well-versed decisions. From the colonial period through the military rule, and now the current democratic dispensation, Nigerian journalists have often been at the forefront of advocating for political reforms and defending civil liberties (Ojebode, 2018; Salawu, 2019; Oso, 2020).

Apart from these critical role, today's Nigerian media face increasing attacks for compromising its freedom and independence. They have been accused of political partiality, exaggerated reports, and excessive corporate influence as to what is reported, how it is reported, as well as what is not reported. These raise questions about the credibility of the media as the fourth estate. This study is therefore set to answer the probing question: Has the Nigerian mainstream media compromised or abdicated its role as the fourth estate of the realm (Oso, 2020; Okunna & Omenugha, 2019; Asemah et al., 2020)?

Furthermore, the emergence of digital media and social networking platforms have transformed the information landscape in Nigeria and all over the world. Studies show that social media platforms have become important arena for political communication and citizen participation

(Suleiman & Peter, 2025; Ojebode, 2018). However, these platforms also present challenges such as misinformation, shallow political engagement and declining reliance on traditional media institutions.

In addition, recent empirical studies highlight emerging challenges affecting watchdog journalism in Nigeria. For example, a national survey of journalists conducted by Aja et al. (2024) found that many Nigerian journalists do not strongly perceive the watchdog role as the primary responsibility of journalism, which significantly influences their willingness to engage in investigative reporting.

Despite these, the Nigerian mainstream media continue to play an important role in democratic governance. Investigative journalism has led to the exposure of corruption, scandals, and policy failures. Media coverage of elections, governance, and public policy has also contributed to public awareness and civic engagement (Sobowale, 2022; Oso, 2020). This study therefore examines the performance of Nigerian mainstream media in carrying out their watchdog responsibilities, the challenges they face, and the implications for democratic governance.

Objective of the Study

The general objective of this study is to evaluate the performance of the Nigerian mainstream media in fulfilling its role as the Fourth Estate of the Realm in promoting accountability, transparency, and democratic governance.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the extent to which Nigerian mainstream media perform their watchdog role over government and public institutions.
2. Assess how effectively the Nigerian mainstream media inform and educate citizens on matters of governance and public interest.
3. Evaluate the degree of independence of Nigerian mainstream media from ownership, political, and economic influences.
4. Identify the challenges facing Nigerian mainstream media in

performing their role as the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

Research Questions

Below are the questions that guided the research:

1. To what extent do Nigerian mainstream media perform their watchdog role over government and public institutions?
2. How effective are Nigerian mainstream media in informing and educating citizens on matters of governance and public interest?
3. To what extent are Nigerian mainstream media independent from political, economic, and ownership influences?
4. What challenges hinder Nigerian mainstream media from effectively performing their role as the Fourth Estate of the Realm?

Literature Review

The Concept of the Fourth Estate

The concept – Fourth Estate refers to the role of the media as an independent institution responsible for monitoring government and protecting the interests of the public. According to McQuail (2010), the media serve as a watchdog by investigating wrongdoing, exposing corruption, and informing citizens about government policies and actions.

History had it that, the notion of the Fourth Estate emerged in eighteenth-century Europe where the press began to play an influential role in shaping public opinion and influencing political decisions. Over time, scholars and political thinkers began to recognize the press as an informal but powerful institution capable of checking the excesses of government authority (Sobowale, 2022). The media therefore became a central component of democratic governance because they help expose corruption, monitor public policies, and provide a platform for debate on issues affecting society.

In the present-day democracies, the Fourth Estate role of the media is closely linked to the principle of accountability. By scrutinizing government actions and informing citizens about public affairs, the media create pressure

on political leaders to act responsibly and transparently (McCombs, 2020).

However, the ability of the media to function effectively as the Fourth Estate depends on several factors such as press freedom, journalistic professionalism, editorial independence, and access to information. Without these conditions, the media may find it difficult to investigate wrongdoing or hold public officials accountable (Nwabueze, 2021).

Evolution of the Nigerian Mainstream Media

Early newspapers such as *Iwe Irohin* and later publications like *West African Pilot* became platforms for nationalist agitation during the colonial era (Ojebode, 2018). These publications mobilized public opinion against colonial rule and contributed significantly to Nigeria's struggle for independence.

After independence in 1960, the Nigerian media kept on influencing political discourse using investigative journalism and political commentary. The press served as a major channel for public debate on national issues and frequently challenged government policies perceived as detrimental to public interest (Salawu, 2019).

However, the Nigerian media have also experienced periods of repression, particularly during military regimes when press freedom was severely restricted. Journalists were often arrested, newspapers were banned, and media organizations were subjected to strict government control (Oso, 2020). Despite these challenges, the media remained resilient and continued to advocate democratic governance and civil liberties.

Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, the media environment has expanded significantly with the growth of private radio and television stations as well as online news platforms. These developments have increased the diversity of information sources available to citizens and strengthened the media's potential to perform its watchdog role (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2020).

Nevertheless, scholars argue that the Nigerian media still face several challenges that affect their ability to function fully as the Fourth Estate. These challenges include political interference, economic pressures, ownership influence and professional ethical issues (Okunna & Omenugha, 2019).

The Watchdog Role of the Media in Democratic Societies

The watchdog role of the media is one of the most widely discussed concepts in mass communication scholarship. According to McCombs (2020), the media perform a monitoring function by observing the activities of government officials and reporting them to the public. This process enables citizens to evaluate the performance of political leaders and demand accountability where necessary.

In democratic societies, investigative journalism plays a crucial role in fulfilling this watchdog responsibility. Investigative reporting involves in-depth examination of issues such as corruption, financial mismanagement and abuse of power (Sobowale, 2022; McQuail, 2010). By uncovering hidden information and presenting it to the public, investigative journalists contribute significantly to transparency in governance (Sobowale, 2022).

In Nigeria, the media have played an important role in exposing corruption scandals and policy failures. Several high-profile investigations conducted by journalists have led to public debates and policy reforms. However, recent studies suggest that the depth and frequency of investigative journalism in Nigeria remain limited due to several structural constraints (Nwabueze, 2021).

Empirical Review

Journalists' Perception of the Watchdog Role

Recent empirical studies have examined how the Nigerian journalists perceive and apply the watchdog role of the media in their day-to-day activities. One of the key studies in this area was conducted by Aja et al. (2024) who investigated the perception and practice of watchdog journalism

among Nigerian journalists. The study revealed that although many journalists recognize the importance of the watchdog role, a significant proportion do not strongly identify investigative reporting as a primary professional responsibility.

The study also found that journalists' perception of their professional role affects their willingness to engage in investigative reporting. Journalists who view watchdog journalism as central to their professional identity are more likely to investigate corruption and misconduct in public institutions (Aja et al., 2024). On the contrary, those journalists who see their role primarily as information disseminators tend to rely on official press releases and government sources rather than conducting independent investigations.

These findings suggest that strengthening journalists' professional orientation towards investigative reporting may be necessary to enhance the watchdog capacity of the Nigerian media.

Media Ownership and Editorial Independence

Another important issue affecting the performance of Nigerian media as the Fourth Estate is media ownership. Studies have shown that ownership structures can significantly influence editorial policies and news coverage. In many cases, media organizations owned by political elites may avoid reporting stories that could negatively affect the interests of their owners (Eke, Adeyemi & Ochor, 2024).

Research on media ownership in Nigeria indicates that ownership influence can sometimes transform the media from watchdogs into "lapdogs," where journalists prioritize the interests of media proprietors rather than the public interest (Omenugha, 2020). Such practices undermine the credibility of the media and weaken their ability to hold powerful actors accountable.

Public perception studies also indicate that many Nigerians believe that media ownership influences news reporting. As a result, audiences often

cross-check information from multiple news sources to verify the credibility of media reports (Akinwale, 2021).

Investigative Journalism and Corruption Reporting

Investigative journalism plays a central role in exposing corruption and promoting accountability in democratic societies. In Nigeria, corruption reporting has become a major focus of media coverage due to the widespread perception of corruption in public institutions.

Suleiman (2025) examined corruption reporting in Nigerian newspapers and found that only a small proportion of corruption-related news stories contained genuine investigative elements. Most reports were based on official statements from government institutions such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC).

These findings indicate that while corruption remains a prominent issue in Nigerian media coverage, the level of investigative journalism required to uncover hidden corruption networks remains limited.

Press Freedom and Safety of Journalists

Press freedom is another critical factor influencing the ability of the media to perform their watchdog role. Journalists must operate in an environment where they can investigate and report issues without fear of intimidation or harassment.

Recent reports indicate that journalists in Nigeria face increasing threats while performing their day-to-day professional duties. Cases of harassment, unlawful arrest, and intimidation of journalists have been documented by several media advocacy organizations and groups. Such threats can discourage journalists from pursuing sensitive investigative stories involving powerful political or economic actors (Oso, 2020).

Without adequate protection for journalists and strong legal frameworks supporting press freedom, the media may struggle to perform their role as the Fourth Estate effectively.

Digital Disruption and the Changing Information Landscape

The emergence of digital technologies and social networking platforms has significantly transformed the media landscape in Nigeria. Citizens now have access to multiple sources of information beyond traditional media. Online platforms have expanded access to information and created new opportunities for citizen participation in political communication. Studies show that social media platforms have become important sources of political information for many Nigerians, particularly young people. These platforms allow citizens to share opinions, debate public issues and mobilize support for political causes (Suleiman & Peter, 2025).

However, digital media also present challenges such as misinformation, fake news and declining trust in traditional media institutions. As a result, mainstream media organizations must adapt to the changing information environment while maintaining professional standards and credibility.

Despite these challenges, mainstream media continue to maintain credibility and institutional authority compared to unverified sources of information on social media.

Theoretical Framework

The Agenda-Setting Theory and the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press are the two theories which drive the research.

Agenda-Setting Theory

The theory developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972) postulates that media organizations influence public perception by highlighting specific issues while downplaying others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The theory explains how media organizations shape public discourse by determining which topics are important. They prioritize certain issues such as corruption, governance, and national development and people

naturally focus on them. Thus, the suggestion that the media may not tell people what to think, but they are very good in telling people what to think about.

Social Responsibility Theory

The social responsibility theory of the press stipulates that media freedom must be accompanied by responsibility to society. It was developed by the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press in 1947 and later elaborated by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) in their seminal work *Four Theories of the Press*.

The theory argues that while the media should enjoy freedom, such freedom must be accompanied by responsibility to serve the public interest, provide truthful information and uphold ethical standards in journalism (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design using a descriptive approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social phenomena. The design was considered appropriate because it allows for an in-depth examination of journalists' experiences and perceptions regarding the role of the Nigerian mainstream media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

Population of Study

The population of the study comprised practicing journalists working in selected mainstream media organizations in Nigeria, including print, radio, and television stations. These journalists were considered appropriate because they are actively engaged in news gathering, reporting, and editorial decision-making processes that reflect the watchdog function of the media.

Sample Size

The study involved **15 journalists** selected from mainstream media organizations in Nigeria. The sample size was considered adequate for qualitative inquiry, where emphasis is placed on depth of information rather than statistical representation.

Sampling Technique

The study employed purposive sampling technique. Participants were selected based on their professional experience in journalism, particularly in political reporting, investigative journalism, and editorial operations.

Instrument of Data Collection

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. The instrument was designed to elicit detailed responses on the watchdog role of the media, media independence, challenges of journalism practice, and the influence of political, economic, and digital factors on media performance.

Method of Data Collection

Data were gathered through **in-depth interviews** conducted with the selected journalists. Interviews were carried out face-to-face and through telephone/online platforms, depending on respondents' availability and convenience.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analyzed using qualitative thematic content analysis. The interview transcripts were carefully read, coded, and grouped into themes in line with the research objectives. Key patterns relating to media watchdog role, independence, challenges, and digital disruption were identified and interpreted to draw meaningful conclusions on the

performance of Nigerian mainstream media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

Presentation of Findings

Research Question One:

To what extent do Nigerian mainstream media perform their watchdog role over government and public institutions?

The responses revealed that Nigerian mainstream media continue to perform their watchdog role to a considerable extent through investigative reporting, public interest journalism, and exposure of corruption and governance failures. Respondents cited several instances where media organizations such as Premium Times, Daily Trust, and the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR) exposed corruption scandals, oil theft, constituency project fraud, and human rights abuses. The respondents generally agreed that despite numerous challenges, the media remain an important mechanism for holding government officials and public institutions accountable.

Research Question Two:

How effective are Nigerian mainstream media in informing and educating citizens on matters of governance and public interest?

The respondents acknowledged that mainstream media continue to play an important role in informing and educating citizens about governance, elections, public policies, and national development issues. However, they noted that the growing influence of social media, misinformation, and declining public trust in conventional media have affected the effectiveness of mainstream media in performing this responsibility.

Research Question Three

To what extent are Nigerian mainstream media independent from political, economic, and ownership influences?

The responses revealed widespread concern regarding the

independence of Nigerian mainstream media. Most respondents indicated that media ownership, political affiliations, advertising dependence, and government influence significantly affect editorial decisions. Respondents particularly noted that media organizations owned by politicians or politically connected individuals often experience direct or indirect interference in news content and editorial policies.

Research Question Four

What challenges hinder Nigerian mainstream media from effectively performing their role as the Fourth Estate of the Realm?

The study identified several major challenges confronting Nigerian mainstream media. These include political interference, ownership influence, economic pressures, poor remuneration of journalists, the "brown envelope syndrome," security threats, intimidation of journalists, regulatory pressures, digital disruption, declining advertising revenue, and the spread of misinformation through social media platforms.

Respondents further identified inadequate funding for investigative journalism, arbitrary sanctions by regulatory agencies, abuse of legal instruments such as the Cybercrimes Act, and the absence of adequate protection for journalists as significant obstacles to effective media performance.

Discussion of Findings

The findings show that Nigerian mainstream media continue to perform their watchdog function through investigative journalism, exposure of corruption, and monitoring of public institutions. Respondents highlighted cases reported by outlets such as Premium Times and ICIR as evidence of media effectiveness in promoting accountability. This indicates that despite structural constraints, the media remain active in exposing governance failures. The finding aligns with Sobowale (2022), who emphasizes investigative journalism as central to democratic accountability,

and supports McQuail's (2010) view of the media as societal watchdogs.

Findings further show that the media remain important in informing and educating citizens on governance and public affairs. However, respondents noted that misinformation and the rise of social media have weakened traditional media influence. This supports Suleiman and Peter (2025), who argue that digital platforms have reshaped political communication and public engagement, reducing reliance on mainstream media.

The study reveals that Nigerian mainstream media operate under limited independence due to ownership influence, political interference, and economic dependence. Respondents observed that editorial decisions are often shaped by proprietors, advertisers, and government pressure, resulting in self-censorship. This finding is consistent with Okunna and Omenugha (2019) and Oso (2020), who note that structural influences significantly constrain media autonomy in Nigeria, contrary to the Social Responsibility Theory.

Findings indicate that Nigerian journalists face multiple challenges, including poor remuneration, political pressure, security threats, regulatory control, and digital disruption. Economic hardship also encourages unethical practices such as “brown envelope journalism,” while declining advertising revenue weakens media sustainability. These factors collectively undermine investigative journalism and weaken the watchdog capacity of the media, supporting Asemah et al. (2020) on institutional constraints affecting media performance.

Conclusion

Nigerian mainstream media continue to perform their watchdog role through investigative reporting, exposure of corruption, and monitoring of government activities, thereby contributing to accountability and democratic governance. The media remain important sources of information

and public education on governance and public affairs, although their influence is increasingly challenged by the rise of digital and social media platforms. The independence of Nigerian mainstream media is significantly affected by ownership interests, political interference, and economic pressures, which often compromise editorial objectivity and professional autonomy. Political, economic, legal, and technological challenges continue to hinder the effectiveness of Nigerian mainstream media in fully performing their role as the Fourth Estate of the Realm.

Recommendations

1. Media organizations should strengthen editorial independence by establishing policies that protect journalists and editors from undue ownership, political, and commercial interference.
2. Government should provide a more enabling environment for press freedom by protecting journalists from intimidation, harassment, and arbitrary application of laws that restrict media practice.
3. Media proprietors should improve journalists' welfare through better remuneration, capacity building, and adequate funding of investigative journalism to reduce vulnerability to unethical practices.
4. Mainstream media organizations should embrace digital innovation and fact-checking mechanisms to combat misinformation and maintain credibility in the evolving media landscape.

References

- Adeleke, A. (2020). Digital disruption and the changing landscape of journalism in Nigeria. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, 12(3), 45–58.
- Aja, S. U., Chukwu, J. N., & Okeke, C. (2024). Perception and practice of

- the watchdog role among journalists in Nigeria. *African Journalism Studies*, 45(2), 89–105.
- Akinwale, A. A. (2021). Media credibility and public trust in Nigeria's democratic process. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 13(2), 211–227.
- Asemah, E. S., Nwammuo, A. N., & Nkwam-Uwaoma, A. O. A. (2020). *Theories and models of communication*. Jos University Press.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Eke, S. J., Adeyemi, O., & Ochor, M. (2024). Media ownership and editorial independence in Nigeria. *African Communication Research*, 17(1), 65–82.
- McCombs, M. (2020). *Setting the agenda: Mass media and public opinion* (3rd ed.). Polity Press.
- McCombs, M., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Nwabueze, C. (2021). *Media and communication theory: A foundation for research*. TopShelve Publishers.
- Ojebode, A. (2018a). The Nigerian press and democratic development. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 10(1), 23–37.
- Ojebode, A. (2018b). *Development communication and social change in Nigeria*. Stirling-Horden Publishers.
- Okunna, C. S., & Omenugha, K. A. (2019). *Introduction to mass communication* (3rd ed.). New Generation Books.
- Omenugha, K. A. (2020). Ownership influence and news credibility in Nigerian media. *Journal of Communication and Media Research*, 12(1), 101–115.
- Oso, L. (2012). Press freedom and the Nigerian media. *Media, Culture & Society*, 34(4), 485–496.
- Oso, L. (2020). Media freedom, democracy and the challenges of journalism practice in Nigeria. *African Journalism Studies*, 41(3), 35–50.

- Salawu, A. (2019). Nigerian media and the struggle for democratic consolidation. *Journal of African Communication Research*, 12(2), 155–172.
- Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). *Four theories of the press*. University of Illinois Press.
- Suleiman, H. (2025). Corruption reporting in Nigerian newspapers: Patterns, challenges and implications. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 40(1), 15–30.
- Suleiman, H., & Peter, J. (2025). Social media, political communication and citizen engagement in Nigeria. *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, 16(2), 145–162.