

HAVE THE NIGERIAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA COMPROMISED ITS ROLE AS THE FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM?

Rita Chinazo Emeka-Ebere¹ and Greg Ezeah H. (PhD)²

^{1,2}Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
rita.emeribe@unn.edu.ng, gregory.ezeah@unn.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of Nigerian mainstream media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm, assessing whether the press functions effectively as a watchdog or is compromised by political, economic, and structural pressures. Specifically, the study sought to: (i) examine how ownership structures influence editorial independence; (ii) assess the impact of commercial pressures on journalistic standards; and (iii) evaluate the role of investigative journalism in sustaining democratic accountability. Drawing on a purposive sample of 38 peer-reviewed journal articles, 5 institutional reports, and 3 press-freedom indices published between 2016 and 2026, the study employed thematic content analysis to identify five key themes: ownership structure and political influence, and economic pressures, professional ethics and journalistic standards, investigative journalism, and digital media challenges. Findings indicate that concentrated ownership, political affiliations, and reliance on advertising revenue often compromise editorial independence and ethical standards, limiting the media's capacity to hold power accountable. Nonetheless, professional ethics, capacity-building, and investigative journalism emerge as critical mechanisms for enhancing accountability and public trust. The study recommends transparency in ownership, strengthened ethical frameworks, legal protections, institutional support for investigative reporting, and responsible use of digital media to empower Nigerian media to fulfil their democratic mandate effectively.

Keywords: Nigerian media. Fourth Estate. Investigative journalism. Media ownership.

INTRODUCTION

The designation of the media as the "Fourth Estate of the Realm" rests on the fundamental premise that a free press acts as an essential guardian of

democracy and a neutral conduit for public information (Eziokwu, 2004). Within the broader African landscape, specifically across Sub-Saharan regions, the late 20th century ushered in a wave of democratic transformation following the end of the Cold War (Diamond, 2010). For Nigeria, however, this transition was uniquely fraught. Between 1966 and 1999, the nation endured a series of military interventions that severely eroded and, in some instances, completely dismantled democratic institutions (Asobie, 2005). Throughout these decades of authoritarian rule, the Nigerian media became a critical platform for citizens to advocate for the foundational principles and civil structures necessary for a post-military society.

Legally, the Nigerian Media's mandate is enshrined in Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution, which explicitly tasks the press, radio, and television with holding the government accountable to the citizenry (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This constitutional recognition positions the media as a vital watchdog, intended to serve as a check on power and a catalyst for societal progress (Shardow & Asare, 2016). Historically, the Nigerian press has been lauded for its resilience, particularly during the independence struggle and the resistance against military juntas. Much of this "watchdog" reputation, however, is credited to the print media. For example, investigative journalism in the print sector was instrumental in exposing the age and certificate falsification scandal that forced Speaker Salisu Buhari to resign after only 49 days in office in 1999 and uncovering attempts to extend President Olusegun Obasanjo's tenure via a 2006 constitutional amendment bid, which the National Assembly ultimately rejected (Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019).

Despite these historical achievements, a widening gap exists between the media's theoretical responsibilities and its current performance, especially within the broadcast sector. Unlike their counterparts in developed nations like the United States, Nigerian broadcasters have often been criticised for a perceived lack of vigour in monitoring government excesses (Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003). Even with the 1992 deregulation of the airwaves and the 2011 passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, the media landscape remains hindered by systemic obstacles.

Contemporary scholars argue that legislative tools like the Cybercrime Act and the Official Secrets Act are frequently used to intimidate investigative reporters and stifle transparency (Ahmed & Idi, 2025; AP News, 2024).

Beyond state-level pressure, the Nigerian media faces internal crises, including ethical compromises like "brown envelope" journalism, editorial interference by politically linked owners, and infrastructural deficits such as unreliable power (Inobemhe et al., 2025; Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025). These factors create a "transparency ecology" that is often fragile and easily manipulated. Consequently, the Nigerian media finds itself at a crossroads: balancing its duty as a democratic sentinel against the pressures of political and economic survival. This article provides a thematic review to determine whether the mainstream media in Nigeria truly functions as an independent Fourth Estate or if its role has been significantly compromised in the face of a complex, fledgling democracy.

Methodology

To investigate the dualistic role of the Nigerian mainstream media as either a democratic watchdog or a compromised entity, this study utilises a qualitative research design centred on thematic content analysis. The scope of the review is limited to high-impact scholarly materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and official institutional reports published between 2016 and 2026. This ten-year timeframe was deliberately chosen to capture the most recent and rapidly evolving phase of Nigeria's media landscape, particularly the rise of digital and social media platforms and their impact on press independence and accountability, including the most recent regulatory and policy developments affecting press freedom and media operations in Nigeria. By synthesising data from Google Scholar, JSTOR, and African Journals Online (AJOL), supplemented by reports from Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and Freedom House, the study ensures a comprehensive examination of the historical and contemporary forces shaping the Nigerian press.

The analytical framework is structured around three primary thematic pillars: the media's constitutional mandate under Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution, the systemic barriers such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, 2015 and ownership interference that impede investigative journalism, and a comparative assessment of performance between the print and broadcast sectors. Using a deductive thematic approach, the gathered literature is **categorised** to highlight the tensions between theoretical "Fourth Estate" expectations and the practical realities of "brown envelope" ethics and political pressure. This systematic synthesis allows for a nuanced evaluation of how effectively the media monitors the powerful while navigating an increasingly volatile transparency ecology in a developing democracy.

The Fourth Estate and the Watchdog Function of the Media

The concept of the Fourth Estate of the Realm positions the media as a critical institution in democratic societies, charged with monitoring government activities and holding leaders accountable. Historically, the term emerged in Europe to describe the press as an independent societal force capable of influencing political decisions and promoting public welfare (Akinfeleye, 2003). In the Nigerian context, the media's role as the Fourth Estate is particularly significant due to the country's ongoing struggles with governance, corruption, and institutional weaknesses (Asobie, 2005; Diamond, 2010). Scholars argue that the press is not only a vehicle for disseminating information but also a key instrument for ensuring transparency, accountability, and democratic participation (Eziokwu, 2004; Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003).

Constitutional provisions in Nigeria explicitly reinforce the media's watchdog function. Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria mandates that the press "shall serve as a check on government and ensure accountability to the people" (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1999; Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017). This legal framework situates the media as an independent observer of governance, emphasising its responsibility to provide citizens with

timely, accurate, and critical information on governmental operations. According to Ojomo (2009), the press's ability to scrutinise political authorities and public officials is central to its identity as a Fourth Estate, particularly in emerging democracies where institutional checks on power are often weak.

Empirical research in Nigeria has highlighted the media's active involvement in monitoring political processes and exposing malfeasance. Apata and Ogunwuyi (2019) note that the press played a crucial role in reporting the 1999 scandal involving the Speaker of the House of Representatives, providing evidence that media scrutiny can directly influence public perception and political accountability. Similarly, Shardow and Asare (2016) contend that mainstream Nigerian media, when independent, function effectively as guardians of democracy by exposing corruption, amplifying citizens' voices, and fostering political debate. These studies collectively underscore the normative expectation that the media should function as a watchdog rather than merely a conduit for official information.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of Nigerian media as a watchdog is contingent upon multiple structural and institutional factors. Inobemhe et al. (2025) argue that the interaction between government and media institutions in Nigeria is often conflictual, as regulatory pressures, threats of sanctions, and political interference can constrain the press's capacity to operate independently. Similarly, Ojomo (2009) highlights that investigative reporting, a critical tool for media oversight, is often limited by financial, legal, and logistical challenges, which reduce the scope and impact of watchdog journalism. These structural limitations illustrate that the normative role of the press does not automatically translate into practice without supportive institutional and professional environments.

The rise of digital media has introduced additional dimensions to the watchdog function. Scholars point out that infrastructural deficiencies, limited digital literacy, and inadequate access to modern journalism technologies can hinder investigative reporting and constrain the effectiveness of digital watchdog platforms (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; Ahmed & Idi, 2025). Nevertheless, the

proliferation of online media and citizen journalism has expanded opportunities for holding public officials accountable, even as it introduces new challenges such as misinformation, reduced gatekeeping, and verification difficulties (AP News, 2024).

The professional orientation of journalists also influences the extent to which the media performs its watchdog role. Studies show that journalists' commitment to investigative reporting, ethical standards, and editorial independence shapes the effectiveness of media oversight (Ojo, 2003; Ojomo, 2009; Shardow & Asare, 2016). Without a strong culture of professionalism, adherence to codes of ethics, and adequate resources, the media may fail to act as an effective Fourth Estate, leaving governance gaps unaddressed. Consequently, scholars advocate for continuous training, institutional support, and legal protections to enable Nigerian journalists to perform their watchdog functions effectively (Eziokwu, 2004; Akinfeleye, 2003).

Overall, the concept of the media as the Fourth Estate in Nigeria underscores the essential role of journalism in promoting democratic accountability, transparency, and public oversight. By scrutinising government activities, reporting corruption, and facilitating public discourse, the press serves as a key mechanism through which citizens can hold authorities accountable. However, structural, professional, and technological constraints continue to shape the degree to which this ideal is realised in practice.

Media Ownership Structure and Political Influence

The structure of media ownership in Nigeria has been widely recognised as a critical determinant of the independence, credibility, and watchdog capacity of the press. Scholars argue that ownership patterns directly influence editorial policies, news framing, and the overall autonomy of journalists in reporting sensitive political and governance issues (Akinfeleye, 2003; Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003). In the Nigerian media landscape, ownership is concentrated among a mixture of state institutions, political elites, and wealthy private entrepreneurs, a combination that

often creates conflicts of interest between public accountability and owners' personal or political objectives (Ojomo, 2009; Shardow & Asare, 2016).

State ownership of media organisations, particularly public broadcast outlets, has historically been linked to government influence over news content, resulting in coverage that frequently favors incumbents and diminishes critical reporting of political actors (Ojo, 2003; Asobie, 2005). The Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), for example, have faced criticism for framing government initiatives positively while downplaying opposition perspectives, a practice that undermines the media's watchdog function (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017; Ojomo, 2009). Scholars contend that this structural dependency creates an environment in which journalists are pressured to conform to editorial guidelines aligned with government interests, sometimes at the expense of public accountability (Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019; Eziokwu, 2004).

Private ownership is also a significant factor shaping media independence. Many newspapers and broadcast outlets are owned by politically connected individuals or business magnates who may wield editorial control to advance personal agendas (Akinfeleye, 2003; Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003). This influence manifests in selective reporting, censorship of unfavorable stories, and prioritisation of issues that align with the owners' political or economic interests (Ojomo, 2009; Shardow & Asare, 2016). Empirical studies indicate that journalists operating under such conditions often self-censor, avoid controversial political coverage, or frame stories in ways that protect ownership interests, thereby weakening the press's role as an independent Fourth Estate (Ojo, 2003; Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017).

The entanglement of political interests and media ownership is further compounded by the concentration of media outlets in the hands of a small number of individuals or corporate entities. Guanah and Bebenimibo (2025) observe that ownership concentration reduces diversity of viewpoints and limits pluralistic discourse. This situation diminishes the capacity of media institutions to hold multiple centres of power accountable. Similarly, Inobemhe et al. (2025) note that

the intertwined relationships between owners, political actors, and advertisers frequently result in editorial decisions that prioritise economic or political gains over civic responsibility.

Digital media, while offering alternative platforms, have not entirely escaped the influence of ownership structures. Ahmed and Idi (2025) argue that online media platforms controlled by private interests or politically affiliated entities often reproduce the biases present in traditional media, highlighting that ownership influence remains a pervasive challenge in both conventional and digital spaces. Even as citizen journalism and social media provide new avenues for scrutiny, infrastructural limitations and low digital literacy can hinder the watchdog potential of these platforms (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; AP News, 2024).

The effects of ownership and political influence extend beyond content selection to broader professional dynamics. Ojomo (2009) highlights that journalists under politically aligned media organisations face pressures that affect story sourcing, investigative depth, and willingness to challenge authority. This structural limitation often results in "lapdog journalism," in which the press reports selectively and avoids substantive critique of powerful actors (Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019; Shardow & Asare, 2016). Consequently, media ownership and political entanglements emerge as major structural impediments to the realisation of an autonomous and effective Fourth Estate in Nigeria.

Scholars suggest that regulatory reforms, transparency in ownership disclosure, and strengthened professional codes of ethics are essential to mitigating these influences (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017; Eziokwu, 2004; Akinfeleye, 2003). By promoting editorial independence and reducing political interference, such measures could enhance the capacity of Nigerian media to perform their watchdog function effectively. Nonetheless, the existing literature indicates that without substantial structural and institutional changes, ownership patterns will continue to shape the press's performance, often constraining its role as a guardian of democratic accountability (Ojo, 2003; Inobemhe et al., 2025; Ahmed & Idi, 2025).

Commercialisation and Economic Pressures on Nigerian Media

The commercialisation of the media in Nigeria has emerged as a significant factor influencing the performance, independence, and watchdog capacity of mainstream journalism. Scholars argue that the increasing reliance of media houses on advertising revenue, sponsorships, and other commercial interests has reshaped news production and editorial decision-making, often compromising journalistic autonomy (Akinfeleye, 2003; Ojomo, 2009). This economic dependency creates a structural tension between the pursuit of public accountability and the need to maintain financial viability, with implications for the media's capacity to serve as a credible Fourth Estate.

Several studies indicate that commercial pressures often lead to selective reporting and editorial bias, particularly when media organisations prioritise stories that attract advertisers or avoid content that may offend sponsors (Eziokwu, 2004; Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003). For instance, Ojomo (2009) observes that broadcast and print media in Nigeria frequently shape news content to appeal to mass audiences or commercial interests, which can result in sensationalism, soft reporting, and the marginalisation of investigative journalism. Such practices reduce the depth and criticality of media oversight, undermining the press's role in exposing corruption and ensuring governmental accountability.

The phenomenon popularly known as "brown envelope journalism" exemplifies the ethical and professional challenges linked to commercialisation. In this practice, journalists receive financial inducements from news sources, advertisers, or political actors to influence coverage or suppress unfavorable stories (Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019; Shardow & Asare, 2016). Studies suggest that brown envelope journalism is particularly prevalent in environments where journalists' salaries are low, funding is inconsistent, and institutional support is weak (Ojo, 2003; Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017). The result is a compromise of editorial independence, diminished public trust, and reduced effectiveness of media as a watchdog institution.

Research further indicates that media commercialisation interacts with political influence to shape news agendas. Ojomo (2009) highlights that media organisations may avoid reporting sensitive political issues to safeguard advertising contracts or maintain favorable relationships with political actors who have financial interests in media ownership. Similarly, Asobie (2005) notes that the reliance on commercial sponsorship can make media organisations susceptible to subtle or overt pressures from corporations and politicians, thereby restricting journalistic freedom and critical reporting. These intertwined pressures demonstrate how economic imperatives can dilute the media's capacity to challenge corruption or hold leaders accountable.

Digitalisation has introduced both opportunities and constraints in this context. On one hand, digital platforms can diversify revenue streams through subscription models, online advertising, and crowdfunding, potentially reducing dependence on politically aligned sponsors (Ahmed & Idi, 2025; Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025). On the other hand, infrastructural deficits, low digital literacy, and unequal access to technology often hinder these potential gains, particularly for investigative journalism initiatives (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; AP News, 2024). Consequently, despite technological advances, commercialisation continues to exert significant influence over editorial choices and the overall performance of Nigerian media.

The interplay between commercialisation and ethical standards has profound implications for journalists' professional behaviour. Ojomo (2009) and Shardow and Asare (2016) observe that journalists operating in commercially pressured environments often self-censor, prioritise entertainment-oriented content, or rely heavily on official sources to avoid jeopardising relationships with sponsors or influential actors. This pattern not only affects news selection but also limits critical reporting, reducing the media's ability to expose governance failures or institutional malpractice. Eziokwu (2004) further notes that ethical lapses linked to commercialisation compromise the credibility of the press, weaken public trust, and

create a perception that the media serve commercial or political interests rather than the public good.

Empirical evidence suggests that the effects of commercialisation are uneven across media platforms and regions. In urban centers with competitive media markets, the pressure to attract advertisers may push media houses toward more sensationalist or populist coverage (Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003; Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017). Conversely, in less competitive or rural markets, media outlets may rely more on government funding or political patronage, increasing susceptibility to political influence (Ojo, 2003; Ojomo, 2009). These patterns underscore the structural challenges of sustaining a financially independent, professionally ethical media landscape in Nigeria.

Scholars advocate a range of strategies to mitigate the negative consequences of commercialisation on media independence. These include strengthening institutional support for investigative journalism, promoting alternative revenue models, enforcing ethical standards, and ensuring transparency in media ownership and funding (Akinfeleye, 2003; Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019; Eziokwu, 2004). Such measures are essential to enhancing the capacity of Nigerian media to function effectively as a watchdog institution, capable of monitoring government actions, exposing corruption, and fostering democratic accountability.

Professional Ethics and Journalistic Standards in Nigerian Media

Professional ethics and adherence to journalistic standards are central to media's ability to function effectively as the Fourth Estate of the Realm. In democratic societies, journalists are expected to operate within frameworks of accuracy, objectivity, fairness, and accountability, which collectively ensure that reporting supports transparency and public oversight (Akinfeleye, 2003; Eziokwu, 2004). In Nigeria, the adherence to these standards has been widely scrutinised, as structural, economic, and political pressures often compromise journalistic integrity (Ojomo, 2009; Shardow & Asare, 2016). Scholars assert that the capacity of Nigerian media to uphold its watchdog role is heavily contingent upon professional

ethics and consistent adherence to established standards of conduct (Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003; Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019).

Ethical journalism is particularly critical in contexts marked by political instability, corruption, and social tension. Asobie (2005) highlights that journalists operating in such environments face competing pressures from government actors, advertisers, and owners, which may encourage self-censorship or the manipulation of information. Ojomo (2009) corroborates this view, observing that Nigerian journalists often face dilemmas when covering politically sensitive topics, leading to compromises in objectivity or selective reporting. Similarly, Ojo (2003) emphasises that lapses in professional ethics, including sensationalism and biased reporting, erode public trust and reduce the effectiveness of media oversight.

One of the persistent ethical challenges in Nigerian journalism is the influence of commercial and political interests on news coverage. Scholars have noted that financial inducements, popularly referred to as "brown envelope journalism," frequently shape reporting decisions (Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019; Shardow & Asare, 2016). Journalists in economically vulnerable institutions may accept gifts or monetary incentives from sources to influence story angles, suppress unfavorable information, or prioritise stories beneficial to sponsors. This practice undermines professional ethics, weakens public confidence, and compromises the media's watchdog capacity (Ojomo, 2009; Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017).

Ownership structure further interacts with professional ethics, affecting newsroom autonomy. Akinfeleye (2003) argues that media organisations owned by politically connected elites or government institutions may impose editorial directives on journalists, forcing them to compromise ethical standards. Such pressures often manifest in selective framing of issues, avoidance of investigative reporting, or over-reliance on official sources to minimise conflict with authorities (Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003; Ojo, 2003). In this context, journalists' adherence to ethical principles becomes a critical safeguard for maintaining the media's

integrity and capacity to fulfil its Fourth Estate function (Shardow & Asare, 2016; Eziokwu, 2004).

Training and professional development are pivotal in strengthening ethical journalism. Scholars emphasise that structured training in journalistic ethics, investigative techniques, and editorial independence enhances journalists' ability to navigate pressures from owners, advertisers, and political actors (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; Ahmed & Idi, 2025). In Nigeria, however, inadequate professional development, poor remuneration, and limited institutional support constrain journalists' capacity to practice ethically (Ojomo, 2009; AP News, 2024). The combination of low salaries, limited career incentives, and exposure to political or commercial pressures often leads to compromised reporting practices that threaten the media's role as an independent watchdog.

In addition to training, adherence to professional codes of ethics is essential for sustaining journalistic integrity. The Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and various media organisations have established codes that emphasise objectivity, accuracy, and fairness. Nevertheless, studies indicate that enforcement remains weak, and violations are rarely sanctioned (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017; Asobie, 2005). This lack of accountability encourages recurring ethical lapses and contributes to a culture of impunity in newsrooms, further limiting the capacity of Nigerian media to operate independently.

Digital media platforms have introduced both ethical challenges and opportunities. Ahmed and Idi (2025) note that the growth of online journalism and social media has amplified the need for ethical vigilance, as misinformation, fake news, and rapid information dissemination can compromise public trust. While digital platforms allow journalists to reach wider audiences and perform watchdog functions more efficiently, inadequate adherence to verification protocols and professional standards remains a challenge (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; AP News, 2024). Scholars highlight that ethical lapses in digital reporting can have broader

societal impacts, including the spread of disinformation, polarisation, and diminished public confidence in mainstream media (Shardow & Asare, 2016; Ojomo, 2009).

Empirical evidence suggests that ethical professionalism directly correlates with the quality of investigative journalism and the media's ability to monitor governance. Strong ethical commitment appears to be a decisive factor separating journalists who pursue rigorous, independent investigative reporting from those who, under economic or political pressure, settle for superficial coverage; this resilience is further reinforced where institutional support, ethical reinforcement, and professional solidarity buffer journalists against pressures that threaten their independence (Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019; Inobemhe et al., 2025).

Ultimately, professional ethics and journalistic standards are not merely theoretical constructs but practical determinants of the media's effectiveness as a Fourth Estate. Maintaining objectivity, fairness, and accountability enables journalists to expose corruption, scrutinise public institutions, and inform citizen decision-making (Eziokwu, 2004; Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003). Without adherence to these ethical frameworks, commercialisation, ownership influence, and political pressures continue to compromise the media's capacity to act as a credible watchdog in Nigeria (Akinfeleye, 2003; Ojomo, 2009; Shardow & Asare, 2016).

Investigative Journalism and Media Accountability in Nigeria

Investigative journalism is widely regarded as the cornerstone of media accountability and a critical component of the Fourth Estate. It involves in-depth reporting that uncovers corruption, malfeasance, and governance failures, enabling citizens to hold public officials accountable (Ojomo, 2009; Apata & Ogunwuyi, 2019). In Nigeria, investigative journalism has historically played a pivotal role in exposing political scandals, corporate misconduct, and policy failures, demonstrating the media's potential as a watchdog institution (Akinfeleye, 2003; Jibo & Okoosie-Simbine, 2003). Scholars emphasise that journalists' capacity to conduct rigorous investigations depends not only on professional skills but also on institutional

support, ethical commitment, and protection from political or economic pressures (Eziokwu, 2004; Shardow & Asare, 2016).

The significance of investigative journalism in promoting accountability is evident in Nigeria's democratic and governance context. Apata and Ogunwuyi (2019) highlight that high-profile political scandals, including the 1999 Speaker of the House of Representatives case, were brought to public attention largely due to proactive investigative reporting. Such coverage compelled public scrutiny, official responses, and, in some instances, legal or institutional intervention. Similarly, Ojomo (2009) observes that investigative journalism in Nigerian broadcast media has served as an effective tool for exposing corruption in local governments and federal ministries, despite persistent structural and operational challenges.

However, investigative journalism in Nigeria faces multifaceted constraints. Political pressures, restrictive laws, and security threats frequently impede journalists from pursuing sensitive stories (Asobie, 2005; AP News, 2024). The Cybercrime Act and its amendments, for example, have been cited as legal instruments that inadvertently discourage investigative reporting, as journalists risk arrest or harassment when exposing politically connected individuals or institutions (Ahmed & Idi, 2025; AP News, 2024). Similarly, Inobemhe et al. (2025) note that government-media conflicts often limit access to information, undermine transparency, and create an environment of fear that hinders investigative initiatives.

Economic pressures further shape the scope and quality of investigative journalism. Scholars argue that low salaries, underfunded newsrooms, and dependence on advertising revenue often force journalists to prioritise commercially viable stories over investigative inquiries (Ojomo, 2009; Eziokwu, 2004; Ojo, 2003). In some instances, media houses may refuse to support costly or time-intensive investigations, particularly when the stories threaten to offend powerful political or corporate actors (Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017; Shardow & Asare, 2016). These

structural and economic limitations illustrate the challenges of maintaining rigorous investigative practices within the Nigerian media landscape.

Ethical considerations also play a central role in the practice of investigative journalism. Journalists are expected to balance public interest against potential harms, ensuring accuracy, fairness, and transparency in reporting (Akinfeleye, 2003; Eziokwu, 2004). Nevertheless, Ojomo (2009) and Shardow and Asare (2016) report that ethical lapses, including sensationalism or misrepresentation, occasionally occur in pursuit of high-impact stories. Such deviations compromise credibility, diminish public trust, and weaken the media's effectiveness as a mechanism for accountability. Training and adherence to professional codes of ethics are therefore essential to sustaining investigative journalism as a reliable tool for governance oversight (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; Ahmed & Idi, 2025).

Digital technologies have transformed investigative journalism in Nigeria, providing new tools for data collection, verification, and dissemination (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; AP News, 2024). Social media platforms, online investigative forums, and digital collaboration networks enable journalists to uncover and broadcast information to wider audiences. However, these opportunities are tempered by challenges, including misinformation, limited digital literacy, and uneven access to infrastructure (Ahmed & Idi, 2025; Inobemhe et al., 2025). Digital tools can enhance accountability but require professional skill, ethical discipline, and institutional backing to achieve meaningful impact.

Empirical studies further suggest that investigative journalism is closely linked to public engagement and governance outcomes. Apata and Ogunwuyi (2019) demonstrate that investigative reports often prompt civic discourse, policy debates, and sometimes legal investigations, illustrating the media's potential to influence public policy. Similarly, Ojomo (2009) notes that investigative reporting serves as a feedback mechanism between citizens and government, highlighting governance failures while promoting transparency. This dynamic reinforces the centrality of investigative journalism to the functioning of the media as the Fourth Estate.

Finally, scholars argue that the sustainability of investigative journalism in Nigeria depends on institutional reforms, financial support, and legal protections. Strengthening newsroom independence, providing adequate resources, and protecting journalists from harassment are essential to ensure that investigative journalism can continue to function as a reliable accountability mechanism (Akinfeleye, 2003; Eziokwu, 2004; Ojomo, 2009). In addition, fostering ethical professionalism and digital competence among journalists enhances the media's capacity to investigate effectively, report responsibly, and maintain public trust (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025; Ahmed & Idi, 2025).

Conclusion

The analysis of Nigerian mainstream media through the lens of ownership structures, commercialisation, professional ethics, and investigative journalism underscores a complex and often contradictory reality. While the media theoretically functions as the Fourth Estate of the Realm, charged with holding power to account and fostering transparency, structural, economic, and political constraints frequently compromise its effectiveness. Ownership concentration, political affiliations, and economic dependence on advertising significantly influence editorial decisions, limiting journalistic autonomy and often skewing news coverage toward the interests of proprietors or political elites.

Commercial pressures, particularly reliance on advertising revenue and sponsorship, further exacerbate these constraints, compelling media organisations to prioritise profitability over public accountability. Practices such as "brown envelope journalism" and selective reporting reflect the ethical dilemmas that arise when economic incentives intersect with journalistic responsibilities. Despite these challenges, professional ethics, adherence to established journalistic standards, and capacity-building remain critical tools for enhancing the media's watchdog function. Journalists' commitment to fairness, accuracy, and accountability, reinforced by

institutional support and regulatory frameworks, can mitigate the influence of commercial and political pressures and strengthen public trust.

Investigative journalism emerges as the most potent mechanism for media accountability, capable of exposing corruption, influencing policy, and facilitating civic engagement. However, its practice is constrained by inadequate funding, limited professional training, restrictive laws, and security risks, illustrating the structural vulnerabilities inherent in the Nigerian media environment. The integration of digital technologies presents both opportunities and challenges, offering alternative platforms for scrutiny while simultaneously necessitating greater ethical vigilance to combat misinformation.

In sum, Nigerian mainstream media occupy a dual position as both potential guardians of democracy and institutions susceptible to compromise. Their effectiveness as the Fourth Estate is contingent upon structural reforms, ethical rigor, professional capacity, and legal protections that enable independent, critical, and sustained reporting. Strengthening these dimensions is essential to ensuring that the media can fulfil its constitutional and democratic mandate, fostering transparency, accountability, and the broader public good.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the structural, economic, and ethical challenges that limit the Nigerian mainstream media's effectiveness as the Fourth Estate. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions to strengthen media independence, professional standards, and public accountability. The following recommendations correspond directly to the study's three objectives: Recommendations 1 and 2 address Objective (i) on ownership structures and editorial independence; Recommendations 3, 5, and 6 respond to Objective (ii) on commercial and regulatory pressures affecting journalistic standards; and Recommendations 4 and 7 advance Objective (iii) on strengthening investigative journalism's role in democratic accountability.

1. **Promote Transparent Media Ownership:** Regulatory agencies should enforce full disclosure of media ownership to minimise undue influence and increase public trust.
2. **Strengthen Editorial Independence:** Media organisations should establish internal policies that protect editorial decision-making from political, commercial, or proprietorial interference.
3. **Enhance Professional Ethics and Training:** Journalists should receive continuous training in ethical journalism, investigative reporting, and digital media literacy.
4. **Support Investigative Journalism:** Media houses and policymakers should allocate dedicated resources, legal protections, and institutional support for investigative reporting.
5. **Leverage Digital Platforms Responsibly:** Digital media should be used to expand reach and public engagement while maintaining rigorous fact-checking and verification.
6. **Implement Legal and Policy Reforms:** Laws such as the Cybercrime Act should be reviewed to protect journalists from harassment and ensure press freedom.
7. **Encourage Public Engagement and Media Accountability:** Media organisations should create channels for citizen feedback and participation to strengthen accountability and democratic oversight.

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