

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NIGERIAN MASS MEDIA AS THE FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM

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Abstract

Democratic theory states that the mass media are considered as the Fourth Estate of the Realm, expecting them to function as a watchdog who watches the three arms of government: Legislature, Executive and Judiciary. Concerns, however, persist as to whether the Nigerian mass media are effective in performing this accountability role since the country reeks in corruption, insecurity and all manner of abuses of public offices. This paper performed a critical assessment of the effectiveness of the Nigerian mass media as the fourth estate of the realm, evaluating the structural as well as the institutional influences that bedevil the watchdog responsibility. The researcher adopted a qualitative analytical method, relying on analyzing existing literature, policy documents, frameworks and scholarships that were relevant to the social responsibility of the media and democratic accountability in Nigeria. Findings revealed that while media houses and sister institutions play important roles in checkmating public office holders and other investigative journalism efforts, they are greatly challenged putting on the fourth estate of the realm toga due to constraints from Nigerian politicians, ownership structure, dependency on advertising for survival and ultimately weak institutions, among other limiting factors hindering their exposé from translating into accountability. The researcher, thereafter, concluded that a rethink or reconceptualization of the fourth estate of the realm model into a collaborative accountability framework (since the Nigerian realities have proven that a singular institution lacks the capacity), will strengthen the accountability ecosystem in Nigeria, earnestly.

Keywords: Media Responsibility, Fourth Estate, Democracy, Nigeria.

Introduction

In modern times, it was Edmund Burke who was credited to have conferred on the press, the Fourth Estate of the Realm status. Denotatively, the mass media were seen as the fourth pillar serving as a monitoring and accountability systems to the three tiers of government: The Executive, Legislature and Judiciary in order to shape public discussions and

agenda, thereby facilitating informed participation of the citizenry (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956).

This classical expectation of the media has gone beyond mere theory to even becoming constitutional. In Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, Section 22 mandates the mainstream media to be the watchdog responsible for holding the government accountable to Nigerians. However, two decades and more into the Fourth Republic when democracy came to be, the nation continues to suffer corruption in the system, deficits in governance, malpractices in electoral conducts, high level of banditry and insecurity, dwindling public trust in public institutions, among others. These lingering challenges, therefore, prompt a critical query: Are the Nigerian mass media still effective in performing their normative cum constitution mandate as the Fourth Estate of the realm?

Relevant empirical studies present a complex picture. On one hand, scholarly works highlight the democratic *joie de vivre* of the Nigerian mass media, particularly their anti-colonialism fights and military rule activism like the good old days of Dele Giwa and his friends (Omu, 1978; Olukotun, 2000). Those days were recognized as the days of real investigative reporting, corruption exposé, fearless political commentary which were the moments of media agenda-setting stronghold/influence. Scholars have identified lingering institutional constraints, on the other hand, which included ownership of the mass media organizations by politicians, commercialization and the business leg pressures, interferences from government regulators as well as "brown envelope journalism," all of which now serve as bottleneck to editorial independence/credibility (Sanusi et al., 2025; Damissah et al., 2025; Ndukwu et al., 2024).

The co-existence of these strengths and weaknesses, therefore, complicates the assessment of whether the mass media have been successful in carrying out their fourth estate of the realm responsibilities or not.

Existing papers have attributed the challenges of the mass media which are factors that can be summed into social-economic and political influences and interferences (Spoorthi, 2024; Ekwunife et al., 2023; Sanusi et al., 2023). However, there remains limited integrative critique that systematically assess the Nigerian mass media vis-à-vis the normative benchmark of the watchdog role while interrogating the structural conditions, shaping their operations, simultaneously which would have revealed whether the perceived underperformance of the media was as a result of weaknesses of the Fourth Estate model itself or sheer unprofessionalism and lack of ethics on the part of the media practitioners. Without such all-encompassing interrogation, the debate risks being one sided – condemnatory or celebratory.

This study is, therefore, compelled to address this gap by interrogating the structural conditions under which the mass media operate in Nigeria, drawing from ownership patterns, commercialization among other factors influencing their democratic performance, and possibly reconceptualize the Fourth Estate model in tandem with the realities of emerging democracies as Nigeria's.

Via this critical lens, this paper contributes to the scholarly debates on mass media effectiveness that is ongoing, as well as ongoing discussions on institutional reforms and democratic consolidations in Nigeria.

The researcher sought to achieve the objectives below:

1. To ascertain how effective the Nigerian mass media have been in functioning as the fourth estate of the realm.
2. To uncover the structural and politico-economic factors constraining the watchdog function of the Nigerian mass media
3. To attempt to reconceptualize the Fourth Estate concept in order to become reflective of the nation's democratic realities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolution of the Nigerian Mass Media as Fourth Estate watchdog

In modern times, the fourth estate of the realm as a concept of practice was credited to the Anglo-Irish political theorist, Edmund Burke. The expression conveys the meaning that the press or mass media happens to be the fourth pillar, supporting the three arms of government: The Legislature, Executive and Judiciary (Damissah et al., 2025, Odey et al., 2025; Lai, 2025). Burke was referring to the gallery in which journalists sit or stand to watch the other three arms of government in proceedings or session.

Historically, therefore, the Nigerian mass media played significant role in public discussions as well as democratic discourse, positioning the institution as a critical player within the nation's governance set-up. Scholars have traced the roots of the role down to colonial nationalist newspapers, where early press like ones established by Nigeria's nationalist leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa among a litany of them, were platforms for leveraging political advocacy and anti-colonial fights. These publishing platforms were responsible for public opinion mobilization as well as inculcating nationalist consciousness in the struggle for Nigeria's independence and freedom from the colonial masters (Genesis, 2025; Oyeleye, 2025; Onuegbu and Anunike, 2024).

During military rule era, the Nigerian mass media soldiered on, asserting their voice and relevance as the guardian of democracy through the instrumentality of 'resistance journalism.' Amidst, strict censorship, media intimidation, draconian laws and decrees, many journalists and media organizations stood their ground and wrestled authoritarian governance head on by exposing the free-for-all corruption, press freedom, rights violations and all forms of undemocratic happenings

(Chad, 2025; Seng and Hunt, 1986). This era ended up strengthening public perceptions that the mass media were truly the watchdog, responsible for upholding civil liberties as well as tenets of democratic governance in Nigeria.

In 1999, following Nigeria's Fourth Republic transition, the mass media milieu significantly expanded. There came the proliferation of privately-owned broadcast channels and their newspaper counterparts.

In recent times, the advent of online journalism and digital media blogs and other platforms have further strengthened the entire news and information scenery, thereby facilitating news dissemination with the speed of light. These developments have all accorded the Nigerian mass media the classical expectation of effectively functioning as the Fourth Estate watchdog within Nigeria's emerging democratic system as also enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The Role of the Fourth Estate in Democratic Governance

In democratic settings, the media are required to function transparently, accountably and facilitate citizen participation. Scholarly works on communication and democratic theory consider the media as centrifugal institution which are responsible for the information need of the public, power scrutiny and engendering civic engagement (Kurfi et al., 2025; Hongcharu, 2024). These requirements form the classical standards for which the works of media establishments are often assessed.

Key among the expectations is the watchdog function, which mandates the media institutions to track the activities of politicians in public offices, to help expose bribery and corruption, inefficiencies and even instances of power abuse. These functions, the media perform via critical reporting and investigative journalism. That way, the media contribute their own quota to upholding checks and balances within a democratic system like Nigeria's. Another role of the fourth estate is the agenda-setting role. Here the mass media tamper with

issues in a way that it begins to receive political and public attention. How they go about this is hype the topics in question and they, the media end up, shaping public discourse concurrently as they direct societal attention toward those topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Again, the mobilization function of the media cannot be overemphasized. The mass media mobilize the citizenry by providing news and information that encourage them to participate in political and civic matters. In addition, facilitating public debate is another role of the fourth estate in democracy systems. Here, the media offer platforms for divergent opinions, which then enables the people to begin to deliberate on topics of national interest.

Together, these indispensable roles of the mass media serve as the normative yardstick for measuring media's effectiveness in democratic systems.

Structural Limitations to Mass Media Effectiveness in Nigeria

Despite the normative functions of the Nigerian mass media as a democratic guardian, many structural constraints have continued to restrain their effectiveness as the much-vaunted Fourth Estate of the realm. One big challenge is political pressure, which often rear its head when politicians and governments try to influence decisions when it comes to editorial matters, thereby suppressing critical journalism and cowing journalists to run for cover. Pressures of such may undermine editorial independence which is indispensable if the media must perform their function as watchdog (Aja et al., 2025).

Another main challenge is ownership interference. Many media houses in Nigeria are owned by the elites and government persons. In fact, the requirements for setting up a media organization is so high that the typical Nigerian journalists cannot even conceive owning a media house. Since media ownership lies in the hands of the 'big man,' this ends up shaping editorial prioritization, leading to what may be tagged, self-censorship as journalists now observe restraints when it comes to scrutinizing people in positions for fear of intimidation and even death. Note that economic factors also play a huge part in limiting media men too.

Dependency on advertising revenue and all forms of commercial content for survival may trounce investigative journalism.

The media in Nigeria also operate within a garroting regulatory and legal framework. Nigerian Laws and regulators have always interfered with journalism (Msughter et al., 2024). Government regulators tamper with freedom of information, creating an environment of self-censorship and caution among journalists.

Overall, these structural limitations serve as shapers to the environment of media operations in Nigeria. All of which affect their capacity to function as the fourth estate of the realm which the normative tenets and the Nigerian constitution bequeathed to media and like institutions.

Empirical Studies Review

Eke et al. (2024) researched on “Watchdog Role of the Media in Nigeria: Examining the Dynamics of Media Ownership, Lapdog Tendencies and News Objectivity.” The scholars interrogated how the Nigerian mass media ownership structures affect the watchdog function of journalists. They found that media ownership influences the objectivity of news and information significantly as many media organizations align their reports to be in tandem with owners’ interests, thereby watering down their watchdog role and invariably weakening the trust the general public has in the media.

This finding is more than a hint that media ownership makeup in Nigeria bedevils the Fourth Estate standing of the country’s media.

Also, Aja et al. (2024) evaluated public perceptions as well as the practice of journalists’ watchdog role, sampling journalists in Nigeria. The query found that investigative journalism is not really a priority to a good number of journalists in Nigeria, saying that the level at which the watchdog function is observed often depends on whether reporters themselves consider the reports important. The study then recommended accountability reporting as a professional

training journalists must be exposed to. This goes to say that that beyond structural limitations, professional posture and training among media men may also determine how effectively Nigerian media organizations perform their social responsibilities.

Eze (2024) carried out a study, interrogating what exactly Nigerian journalists use the much-vaunted Freedom of Information (FOI) Act for. The researcher uncovered that these journalists are highly aware of FOI Act and acknowledge, the Act is a great tool to have access to government content and reporting of sensitive issue of public interest. This translates that tools exist that can encourage investigative reporting in Nigeria, albeit full potential will depend on journalists' effectiveness and utility of those tools.

Adeoluwa and Adedayo (2023) tested the correlations that exist between the media, media freedom and democracy in the Fourth Republic. The scholars discovered that the mass media function significantly to consolidate democracy via the enthronement of transparency, public debate and awareness, politics-wise. Interestingly, the study then found that political cum economic as well as legal factors of the Nigerian media environment often constrain journalists when it comes to functioning as the fourth estate of the realm.

This finding strengthens the argument which says Fourth Estate institution is not just shaped by the journalism profession alone but also by the entire political and other institutional milieus.

Similarly, research by Okorie and Batta (2025) was on the influence, which the watchdog function of media men, has about anti-corruption campaigns. The researchers uncovered that although media reportage of corruption matters impacts on public perception, exposure to investigative journalism on issues of corruption in Nigeria remains low.

This finding indicated that while Nigerian journalists wields the capacity to impact on discourse around governance, the inadequate intensity of watchdog journalism may water down their capacity to maintain accountability.

In furtherance to this, Nwokeocha et al. (2025) researched to see how the Fourth Estate institution has transformed in the digital era. The researchers uncovered that the proliferation of digital technology such as artificial intelligence and citizen journalists has impacted upon the mainstream gatekeeping role of traditional mass media in Nigeria, thereby creating new room for answerability via participatory media operations.

This translates that how effective the Fourth Estate institution is in Nigeria is increasingly being dependent on the interaction that goes on the mainstream media institutions and new digital technologies and other institutions for that matter.

Despite these growing body of studies, not many empirical work has critiqued the institutional effectiveness of Nigerian mass media as the Fourth Estate of the realm. Existing studies focused on common areas like as media ownership, media practices and media freedom. To this end, this study sought to fill this gap by bringing to fore an integrative critical examination of the Nigerian media's effectiveness within a broader democratic frame.

Theoretical Framework

This study finds its anchorage on the classic Normative Democratic theory, Propaganda Model as well as the Political Economy of mass communication.

Originally propounded by classical thinkers like Plato and Immanuel Kant, the normative democratic theory perceives the mass media as an institutional guardian of democratic values such as state power checks, transparency and deliberation all the public good (Siebert et al., 1956). Note that the normative Fourth Estate of the realm notion, attributed to Edmund Burke, conceives the media as a countervailing institute within governance systems. Complementing this view was Jürgen Habermas's (1989) with his public sphere thesis emphasizing that the mass media are an enabler for rational-critical deliberations between the state and its citizens.

Though, the perspectives of political economy complicate these classical expectations.

The Propaganda Model as advanced by Edward S. Herman and his colleague Noam Chomsky (1988) debates that media role is filtered via ownership, ideological pressures, advertising dependency as well as sourcing patterns. From this perspective, the “incapacitation” of the fourth of the realm may well be a reflection of structural limitations rather than incompetence.

By incorporating these frameworks, this paper assesses the Nigerian mass media against the backdrop of democratic values while accounting for realities on ground.

Materials and Methods

Because of the peculiarity of critiquing the structure itself of the much-vaunted fourth estate of the realm, the researcher adopted the Critical Institutionalism research design. This method is often the opposite of standard institutionalism because of its refusal to adopt existing structures as neutral or a given (Cooper et al., 2008).

Munir (2019) concluded that to become critical in the real meaning of the word, institutional theory would need a rebirth hence the attempt by the researcher to rethink the fourth estate toga of the Nigerian media by the end of this paper.

The study’s population comprised of scholarly works, constitutional booklets and institutional publications that addressed the role of the Nigerian media as a Fourth Estate of the realm. The purposive sampling technique was engaged to select materials that are directly relevant to achieve the research objectives, including literature on media accountability, watchdog reporting, and political economy of the Nigerian mass media. The study focused on conceptual synthesization as well as critical interpretation rather than primary data exploration. Materials and literature were selected purely based on applicability and thematic adequacy till sufficient conceptual treatment of the research objectives were achieved.

Analysis of secondary data was able to generate four dominant themes which include watchdog responsibility, agenda-setting impact, structural limitations and need to

reconceptualized Fourth Estate of the Realm. These thematic categories were derived from the synthesization of the empirical works, constitutional stipulation and politico-economy scholarly papers.

Watchdog Responsibility:

From empirical literature materials, there were cases of investigative reporting and corruption-related expose in the Fourth Republic (Nzeaka et al., 2026; Sanusi & Kuyoro, 2024; Olukotun, 2000; Oso, 2012). Coverage of electoral irregularities, public procurement malpractices as well as failures of governments meant institutional capacity for media's constitutional watchdog performance. The evidence, however, indicated that such performances were often episodic instead of being sustained. Successes recorded were largely dependent on individual newsroom values and not systemic institutional practices.

Interpretation: Effectiveness of the Nigerian mass media gives the impression of being contingent rather than institutionalized. In other words, the media possesses some watchdog capability, but lack structural continuity in actual performance. Therefore, effectiveness of the Nigerian mass media as the fourth estate of the realm is moderate.

Structural Limitations:

Politically, ownership of media houses, commercialization-related pressures and dependency on advertising have always influenced editorial independence (Uche, 1989; Oso, 2012). Other key constraints emphasized included pressures from regulators, economic frailty of media houses as well as intimidation and other insecurity journalists face in Nigeria. These challenges are in line with the political economy theory of Herman and Chomsky (1988) which argued that ownership structure and ultimately economic imperatives impact on news production, thereby, describing institutional constraints beyond professional incompetence affecting the fourth estate institution.

Interpretation: Institutional impediments is sandwiched within politico-economic structures, significantly affecting sustained performance of the Fourth Estate of the realm role.

Reconceptualized Fourth Estate of the Realm:

The Fourth Estate in Nigeria should be reconceptualized as a networked accountability ecosystem integrating legacy media, digital journalism, civil society actors, investigative consortia, and strengthened legal protections.

Instead of a singular institutional media model that is rooted in Western democratic tenets (Siebert et al., 1956), a rethink of structurally supported, collaborative performance framework is what the media context in Nigeria requires. This is because the normative fourth estate concept may not be the correct reflection of democratic realities in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

Revelations from this research affirm that the mass media in Nigerian cannot just be tagged a total “failure” neither can they be crowned “effective” in their Fourth Estate of the realm responsibilities. Indications show although the Nigerian mass media have historically positioned themselves as a democratic watchdog, even though their effectiveness as the Fourth Estate is significantly constrained by structural factors such as ownership influence, economic pressures, political interference, and the commercialization of news. These findings reinforce the argument that the performance of the media in democratic accountability cannot be understood outside the political and economic structures within which they operate. These revelations of ownership pressure and structural limitation are consistent with that of Eke et al. (2024) who found that ownership structure the in Nigeria media systems often impacts on editorial independence, which thereby weakens their normative and constitutional watchdog responsibilities.

In the same vein, findings of this study corroborate that of Adeoluwa and Adedayo (2023) who uncovered that while media organizations contribute to democratic strengthening

via agenda setting and their role engendering public debate, politico-economic factors continue to constrain their ability to perform fully their social responsibility role of being the accountability institution. What this present study did in this regard is expand the argument by critically assessing the framework of the Fourth Estate itself, demonstrating how the pressure from the structure collectively water down the capacity of media organizations to consistently checkmate power drunks.

However, the findings of this research differ slightly from that of Eze (2024) who uncovered that journalists in Nigeria possess some level of awareness of the FOI Act as a tool to access government information and other relevant document. While acknowledging the expedience of the Freedom of Information Act, the researcher contends that only legal instruments are not enough to make the Fourth Estate of the realm indispensable unless the structural challenges bedeviling the Nigerian mass media are comprehensively addressed.

Furthermore, findings of this paper is a complement to the scholarship of Nwokeocha et al. (2025) who observed that the proliferation of citizen journalism has transformed the mainstream Fourth Estate face by further making room for public accountability. Therefore, this researcher interprets this development of digital media emergence as an indication that the normative conception of the 'Fourth Estate of the realm' may need a reconceptualization within a networked media milieu where the mainstream media would share the accountability responsibilities with civic actors via digital media platforms as the driver.

Ultimately, scholarships suggest that evaluating the effectiveness of the Fourth Estate of the Realm in Nigerian cannot be said to be done correctly based on journalistic practice alone. Rather, the larger political, economic, and even technological context that are actively shaping the operations of the media in Nigeria must come to fore.

Therefore, these findings reinforce the urgent need to rethink the fourth estate of the realm as a framework but this time with the contemporary democratic practice/realities in Nigeria as the yardstick.

The Proposed Model: Fourth Estate of the Realm Networked Architecture for Nigeria.



The media struggle alone and dirt remains



Only when the "hands" work together can the media emerge as a true fourth estate of the realm

The Interpretation

This revised fourth estate of the realm model is fashioned after the indigenous Igbo philosophy that one hand cannot wash itself clean. In the former, the mass media in Nigeria are depicted as an isolated lone entity struggling in futility to function as the fourth estate of the realm in a toxic environment of Suppression, Intimidation etc. From the image, the rag could not do much as the very water ("Impunity and Corruption") is murky.

As it should, the Legislature has refused to make laws that help. The law-making force is rather interested in "Bribe," as can be seen. For the Judiciary, paralysis is depicted literally with the chain of "Delay" and "Technicalities," so no justice. The anti-corruption bodies, the EFCC and ICPC on their own part, are literally broken and held back by "Political Influence,"

so no arrest of corruption is happening. On their own side, the Executive appears hostile, utilizing power to ward off the media.

The Message, therefore, affirms that the mass media in Nigeria cannot wear the fourth estate of the realm toga if all other actors or institutions ambitiously work against them. The latter which is Panel 2 is the functional ideal where all hands are on deck, represents the researcher's vision of the future – a rethink of the age long fourth estate. The figure shows arms of government functioning in a circular, pro-integrity ecosystem loop. The water has become clear therefore, tagged, "The Rule of Law," suggesting that when the law is applied aright, the environment goes "clean." The figure shows that rather than isolated media, the hands are all in support and interlocked. It can be seen that the Legislature brings about the tools such as the freedom of information Act, the stability portrayed as the Scales then comes from the Judiciary and the unsheathed Sword or teeth is provided by the anti-corruption agencies for the bite. Now that all these are in place, only then can the media become poised to perform because they are now supported or "washed" by the other arms of government. The hand (mass media) is washed clean, raised high and holding a light that shines directly into the "Government & Public Officials" institutions, finally ensuring transparency and accountability to the people.

CONCLUSION

The researcher set out to critique the age-long toga of the Nigerian mass media's function as the Fourth Estate of the Realm. Note that it was the normative democratic theory that accorded the media responsibility of being watchdog over the three arms of government – the executive, legislature and the judiciary on the assumption that strong institutions are already in place to support this oversight. However, the researcher uncovered that the Nigerian reality impedes this idealized model. That is, while media institutions strive to perform their agenda-setting and information dissemination roles, their capacity to compel accountability remains

watered down by institutional weaknesses/threats of other players such as the three arms of government and anti-corruption bodies.

In lieu of these realities, the paper reconceptualizes and reconstruct the Fourth Estate model as a collective accountability network this time and not as a singular institution as accorded by the original Fourth Estate ideologies. Therefore, the study concluded that rather than focusing solely on media reforms alone, a total overhaul of the country's governance architecture where all hands are on deck is required for proper democratic accountability of the Nigerian mass media. Based on the findings, the recommendations advanced to strengthen the ability of the Nigerian mass media to perform effectively as the fourth of estate of the realm are below:

1. Strengthen the EFCC, ICPC and other anti-corruption bodies to be properly funded and guarded against political pressure. That way, media exposés can translate into official investigations and actions of enforcement
2. Improve judicial effectiveness to close accountability gap. Because the judiciary plays an important role in turning investigative exposé to legal consequences, therefore, strengthening its independence will help to reduce procedural delays as well ensure strict enforcement of abuse of office related laws. That way, the much-vaunted investigative journalism will begin in earnest.
3. Prioritize existing laws that protect freedom of the media and express access to information. Nigeria is good at possessing many statutes, including constitutional provisions and guarantees of FOI Act that lack bite. Therefore, government systems must be compelled to fully comply with accountability to enable media men and civil society players have access to the correct information which accountability reporting requires.

4. Strengthen citizen journalism as a critical pillar to help the accountability ecosystem to function. Digital media has expanded the space for wider participation in governance tracking. Therefore, enthroning civic literacy, responsible digital engagement is capable of amplifying investigative reporting and exposé, necessary to compel institutional accountability.
5. Reimagine the fourth estate of the realm as a collective accountability architecture and not a lonely watchdog capable of scampering for cover when the pressure gets too intense. Finally, the researcher recommends a reconceptualization or a rethink of the age long model to be within the ambit of the Nigerian democratic reality. The new model incorporates not just the mass media but also all arms of government, legal frameworks, enforcement agencies, digital platforms and the citizenry to ensure proper functioning of the Nigerian mass media as the fourth estate of the realm.

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