

Collateralized Censorship: Structural Capture, Digital Disruption, and the Crisis of Nigeria's

Fourth Estate

Ibrahim Muhammed Baba

Department of Mass Communication,
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,
Modibbo Adama University, Yola, Adamawa State.
Babamibrahim@mau.edu.ng

Vivien Bello-Osagie PhD,

Department of Languages,
Faculty of Arts and Management Sciences,
Nigerian Army University Biu, Borno State.
moriatvbello@gmail.com

Abstract

This article introduces the concept of collateralized censorship to analyse the structural conditions constraining the Nigerian mainstream press in its democratic fourth estate role. Drawing on political economy theory, an updated Digital-Propaganda Model, and agenda-setting theory, the article argues that converging forces partisan proprietorship, state advertising dependency, the award industry, digital disinformation networks, and platform revenue extraction appear to structurally compromise Nigerian journalism's capacity for accountability. A secondary concept, epistemic exhaustion, hypothesises the cognitive disorientation induced in audiences by coordinated counter-narrative operations. This article adopts a conceptual-analytical design, drawing on illustrative cases and established scholarly literature in the political economy of media tradition. Its theoretical propositions are offered as a framework for future empirical research rather than as findings from systematic data collection. The analysis concludes that reversing collateralized censorship requires structural reform of media ownership, insulation of editorial processes from political finance, and robust regulatory frameworks for digital platforms are the necessary conditions for restoring meaningful fourth estate accountability in Nigeria.

Keywords: collateralized censorship, fourth estate, media capture, Nigeria

Introduction

The press as an autonomous institutional counterweight to the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government carry the weight of both democratic theory and historical aspiration.

Attributed in popular historiography to Edmund Burke and systematised by Thomas Carlyle (1841),

the metaphor presupposes a press whose independence of ownership, freedom from legal coercion, and fidelity to truth render it capable of subjecting power to sustained public scrutiny.

In Nigeria, this aspiration is grounded in a living historical tradition. The *West African Pilot*, launched by Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1937, and the nationalist newspapers that followed mobilised anti-colonial public opinion with civic seriousness that justifies the fourth estate appellation in its most earnest sense (Omu, 1978). That tradition continued through military rule, when publications such as *Newswatch*, *The News*, and *Tell* became symbols of resistance at considerable personal cost to their journalists. Yet seven decades after independence, the conditions for sustaining that tradition of public-interest journalism appear, in the Nigerian mainstream media, increasingly constrained.

This article argues that those constraints are not primarily a matter of individual ethical failure or professional inadequacy, but reflect conditions that systematically disincentivise accountability journalism across significant parts of the mainstream sector. These conditions converge across three conceptually separate dimensions: internal economic entanglement arising from ownership patterns and advertising dependency; external repression through legal harassment and regulatory coercion; and, increasingly, the digital transformation of both the media economy and the information environment. The article's two lead concepts, *collateralized censorship* and *epistemic exhaustion*, are designed to theorise these transformations.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature and develops the integrated theoretical framework. Section 3 presents the methodological approach and its explicit limitations. Section 4 applies these concepts to analyse the principal mechanisms of constraint. Section 5 offers conclusions and a research agenda.

Literature Review

The Fourth Estate in African and Nigerian Context

The fourth estate ideal has a specific and contested history in African media scholarship. Omu (1978) established the historical basis for understanding Nigerian journalism as constitutively political, not merely reporting on but participating in the independence struggle. Olukotun (2002) extended this analysis into the democratic era, documenting how authoritarian structures and underground media developed in symbiotic tension during military rule, shaping the post-transition press culture.

Musa & Mohammed (2004) applied a critical political economy lens, arguing that structural conditions of ownership and financing, not individual professional conduct, primarily determine media performance. Akinfeleye (2008) sharpened the normative question, asking whether the Nigerian press had become the fourth estate of the realm or the fourth estate of the wreck. This article's concept of collateralized censorship offers a theoretically grounded answer, specifying the structural mechanisms through which the fourth estate is compromised.

Political Economy of Media

The political economy tradition provides the principal theoretical foundation for this article. Murdock and Golding (1979) established that media organisations are economic entities whose material conditions of ownership and financing are constitutive of their outputs. Smythe (1981) extended this analysis to audience commodification: the primary product of commercial media is audiences sold to advertisers.

Herman and Chomsky's (1988) five-filter model demonstrated how structurally free media systems produce outputs systematically aligned with elite interests, a framework this article adapts for contemporary Nigeria. Baker (1994) examined advertising as a structural mechanism of editorial discipline, directly relevant to state advertising dependency. Golding and Murdock (1991) applied

political economy to comparative media systems, while Tomaselli and Dunn (2001) and Berger (2010) extended these frameworks to southern African media, establishing a regional context within which the Nigerian case can be situated.

Nigerian Media, Ownership, and Capture

Several studies have documented the specific conditions of Nigerian media ownership and their editorial consequences. Omenugha and Oji (2008) provided empirical evidence of how news commercialisation operates at institutional and individual levels, documenting how poor salaries and institutionalised brown-envelope practices create dependency on news sources and compromise ethical standards. Akpojivi and Akintola (2025), drawing on interviews with journalists from major Nigerian news organisations, found that intersecting political and commercial interests systematically shape news production through mechanisms of press capture, describing a "plutocratic relationship" between media owners and political elites that directly supports the analysis of cross-sectoral proprietorship developed in Section 4.

Dare (2007) provided an insider account of financial patronage in Nigerian journalism, including the award industry practices analysed in Section 4. Together with Akinfeleye (2008), this scholarship establishes that the conditions this article theorises have been observed and partially analysed by prior researchers; this article's contribution is the conceptual framework that integrates and extends those observations.

Digital Disruption, Disinformation, and the Information Environment

The digital transformation of the media environment has generated a substantial and rapidly growing literature. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) provided systematic cross-national evidence of organised social media manipulation, establishing computational propaganda as a global phenomenon rather than a pathology specific to fragile democracies. The application of this framework to the Nigerian context, and the empirical grounding for the Data Boy phenomenon

analysed in Section 4, draws on press freedom monitoring reports and documented cases rather than a single dedicated study, reflecting a gap in the peer-reviewed literature that future empirical work could address.

Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) examined network propaganda as a feature of partisan media ecosystems, while Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) developed a typology of information disorder providing an important point of comparison for the epistemic exhaustion concept proposed in this article. Tufekci (2017) analysed attention fragmentation as a feature of digital public spheres. McCombs and Shaw (1972) and McCombs (2004) provide the agenda-setting framework within which the concept of negative agenda-setting and the power of structural omission is developed below.

Identifying the Gap: Toward a Theoretical Framework

Two conceptual gaps are identifiable across this literature. Political economy scholarship has theorised media capture through ownership concentration and advertising dependency, but no existing concept addresses the distinctive Nigerian pattern of cross-sectoral political proprietorship in which media ownership serves as collateral for the protection of owners' non-media commercial interests. This article proposes *collateralized censorship* to fill this gap.

The disinformation literature has extensively documented the tactics of coordinated digital manipulation, but has not theorised the specific audience-level cognitive outcome this article terms *epistemic exhaustion*: the breakdown of source credibility evaluation under conditions of sustained information saturation. These gaps point toward the need for an integrated theoretical framework drawing on three interlocking traditions.

Theoretical Framework

Political Economy as Foundation

Political economy directs analytical attention to the material interests that ownership structures encode, rather than treating editorial decisions as matters of individual professional ethics. In the Nigerian context, the overlap between media proprietorship and political ambition appears institutional rather than incidental. Musa & Mohammed (2004) and Olukotun (2002) have documented how media houses tend to serve as instruments of political projection and reputational capital accumulation in ways potentially incompatible with the fourth estate ideal. This article extends this tradition by proposing collateralized censorship as a concept specifying how cross-sectoral ownership produces systematic patterns of editorial omission.

Agenda-Setting and Negative Agenda-Setting

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting theory holds that media construct a hierarchy of salience shaping public perception of what issues matter. McCombs (2004) later developed second-level agenda-setting, concerning how media frame the attributes of issues that reach the public agenda.

This article proposes an adaptation suited to contexts where constraints operate primarily through omission rather than emphasis. Negative agenda-setting describes the power to render issues less visible, driven by ownership incentives and financing dependencies rather than editorial discretion. When media organisations owned by politicians appear to decline investigation of those politicians' financial conduct, the pattern is consistent with negative agenda-setting. The concept reorients agenda-setting theory from audience effects toward the conditions of production, serving as a bridge between effects-oriented research and production-oriented political economy.

The Digital-Propaganda Model

For contemporary Nigeria, Herman and Chomsky's (1988) five-filter model requires adaptation along two dimensions. First, the mechanisms operate differently under Nigerian conditions: the ownership filter intensifies when media owners are political entrepreneurs; the advertising filter amplifies through state dominance; the sourcing filter intensifies when owners are themselves part of the elite.

Second, the model requires two additional filters specific to the contemporary Global South context. Flak 2.0 encompasses organised digital harassment and the weaponisation of legal machinery against journalists, capturing both coordinated disinformation networks and strategic legal instruments that impose costs without direct state censorship. The extraction filter addresses the capture of advertising revenue by global digital platforms, a mechanism weakening domestic journalism's economic base while deepening dependency on precisely the state and proprietorial sources that generate the other filters' effects.

Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual-analytical research design situated within the political economy of media tradition. The study does not claim to offer systematic empirical findings about Nigerian media institutions. Rather, it develops and applies new theoretical concepts principally collateralized censorship and epistemic exhaustion as frameworks for understanding patterns of media constraint that existing scholarship only partially theorises. This approach is consistent with an established strand of media studies scholarship in which theoretical innovation is the primary contribution (Golding & Murdock, 1991; Tomaselli & Dunn, 2001). The goal is not to prove that Nigerian media are uniformly captured, but to propose conceptual tools that generate questions for future empirical research.

Source Material

Evidence was drawn from three categories of source material. First, the article draws on peer-reviewed scholarly literature in political economy, communication theory, and African media studies. Second, it incorporates illustrative cases drawn from established press freedom monitoring organisations: the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and Media Rights Agenda (MRA). Cases were selected purposively as instances illuminating the mechanisms under examination; they are not claimed to be representative or exhaustive, and no statistical generalisations are drawn from them. Third, where quantitative claims are made, independent sources are cited alongside advocacy documents, with the distinction between peer-reviewed evidence and grey literature maintained explicitly throughout.

Limitations

Because the article includes no original data collection, no journalist surveys, content analyses, or audience studies, its claims about the internalisation of editorial constraints, the prevalence of award industry practices, and the audience-level effects of disinformation networks are theoretical propositions rather than established findings. The concept of epistemic exhaustion is advanced as a hypothesis requiring future investigation; no audience data exists to establish its prevalence or magnitude. The ownership cases presented identify conditions and public-record matters only; without systematic content analysis, causal claims about editorial consequences cannot be sustained, and none are made. Grey literature sources are used only to illustrate conditions, not to anchor empirical claims. Formulations such as “tends to,” “appears consistent with,” “suggests,” and “may indicate” are used deliberately throughout to signal this interpretive frame.

Analysis and Discussion

Collateralized Censorship: Ownership and Its Consequences

The deepest proposed level of constraint on Nigerian journalism resides in the structure of media ownership. For a proprietor whose primary business interests lie in sectors dependent on government licences, contracts, or regulatory forbearance, a media organisation may function as a strategic defence asset rather than a profit centre. The sectors involved are typically those where government discretion is substantial: oil and gas, banking, telecommunications, construction, and import substitution. The media arm's value lies less in direct profitability than in its capacity to protect primary interests by maintaining relations with regulatory and political actors that discourage critical reporting.

This logic gives rise to collateralized censorship: the tendency toward editorial silence on particular topics as the implicit but effective collateral posted for the survival and prosperity of the owner's other commercial interests. The concept extends existing political economy accounts (Murdock & Golding, 1979) by specifying a mechanism particularly salient where media ownership and political-economic power are tightly intertwined.

The hypothesis is that this process operates not primarily through direct editorial instruction but through the prior shaping of journalistic expectations, career incentives, and organisational culture. Journalists may internalise, through professional socialisation, the implicit boundaries of acceptable reporting. This is not conspiracy but institutional adaptation: journalists learn, over time, which topics advance their careers and which foreclose them. Systematic confirmation through journalist interviews, ethnographic observation, or comparative content analysis would be required to establish the phenomenon's prevalence empirically.

Mapping the Ownership Landscape

Table 1 maps the cross-sectoral ownership pattern that characterises Nigeria’s mainstream media landscape in indicative terms, drawn from press freedom monitoring organisations and public records rather than original data collection. Full beneficial ownership data is frequently obscured through holding companies and proxy arrangements. The table identifies conditions and documented public-record matters only; it does not assert causal links between ownership and specific editorial decisions.

Table 1

Selected Nigerian Media Houses, Ownership Affiliations, and Structural Conditions Relevant to Independence

Media Organisation	Ownership & Cross-Sector Interests	Independence Conditions
The Nation Newspapers	Linked to President Bola Tinubu (President, 2023–) Real estate, finance, logistics; political networks in Lagos/Southwest	Proprietorial affiliation documented by RSF (2023) as shaping editorial orientation toward owner's political networks. No systematic content analysis is available; the structural conflict of interest is identified.
Sun Publishing Group	Orji Uzor Kalu (Governor 2000–2007; Senator 2019–) Banking, airlines (defunct), manufacturing	Cross-sectoral interests include sectors subject to regulatory oversight; documented by Media Rights Agenda (2026) as a structural condition with potential for conflict of interest. Causal editorial claims are not made here.
Silverbird Group (TV/Radio)	Ben Murray-Bruce (former Senator) Entertainment, real estate, hospitality	Government advertising dependency documented (Media Rights Agenda, 2026); proprietor's political activities given sustained coverage. Conditions consistent with advertising-dependency model.
AIT/Raypower (DAAR Communications)	Raymond Dokpesi (late; associates) Close ties to PDP political establishment	Proprietor arraigned by EFCC in December 2015 on six counts of money laundering; acquitted on appeal in 2021 (Sahara Reporters, 2015). Coverage of 2015 election disputed on grounds of partiality. Case illustrates regulatory vulnerability of politically affiliated outlets.
Channels Television	John Momoh (CEO/editorial leadership) Primarily media-centred; publicly held structure	Cited by RSF (2023) and MRA (2026) as comparatively more independent. NBC sanctions for 2023 election coverage demonstrate that external state pressure operates independently of ownership structure.

Note. Compiled from Reporters Without Borders (2023), Committee to Protect Journalists (2020–2024), and Media Rights Agenda (2026). Ownership affiliations reflect public-record information. The table identifies conditions relevant to editorial independence and does not make causal claims about editorial decisions in specific instances.

The Deviant Case and Its Significance

Channels Television is instructive as a deviant case (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Its media-centred ownership structure and publicly held organisation are associated, in press freedom documentation, with greater editorial independence relative to peers (RSF, 2023). The absence of cross-sectoral political proprietorship appears to remove the primary mechanism that collateralized censorship hypothesises.

Yet NBC sanctions against Channels for its 2023 election coverage demonstrate something conceptually separate: that external state repression can constrain even editorially independent outlets. Internal constraint through ownership and external pressure through regulatory power are distinct mechanisms. The deviant case does not refute the collateralized censorship hypothesis; it clarifies the conditions under which relative independence is possible and demonstrates that other mechanisms of constraint remain operative even when ownership is favourable.

Advertising Dependency and the State Advertising Mechanism

A second pillar of the proposed collateralized censorship pattern is advertising dependency, specifically dependency on state advertising revenue. With declining print circulation, contracting private-sector budgets, and intensifying competition from digital platforms, government advertising has become a critical revenue stream for many Nigerian media organisations. The African Media Barometer (2011) documented that "public officials and politicians have found advertising to be a powerful tool in shaping editorial content to their advantage," creating a "he-who-pays-the piper-calls-the-tune relationship" between public authorities and the media.

Adeyemo (2024), in the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, confirmed that traditional media are losing reach as digital platforms grow, with only 34% of Nigerians relying on print media for news. The report further notes that the "economic weakness of news organisations makes them vulnerable to undue influence by politicians and business people." Ishaku and Shem (2022) found

that advertising, while essential for media survival, has "affected the performance of the media in carrying out their constitutional responsibility of protecting the interest of the public and holding government officials accountable."

This dependency is consistent with the second filter of the Propaganda Model and with Baker's (1994) analysis of advertising as a mechanism of editorial discipline. Akpojivi and Akintola (2025) documented through journalist interviews that intersecting commercial and political interests shape editorial decisions in anticipation of proprietorial and advertiser preferences, providing direct empirical grounding for the incentive hypothesis. The mechanism operates through anticipation rather than instruction: editors know that sustained criticism risks alienating a major revenue source.

The Award Industry: Financial Patronage and Editorial Incentives

The award industry describes a recurring pattern of financial entanglement between media organisations and political actors that existing scholarship suggests may be institutionally significant in the Nigerian context. Media organisations stage awards ceremonies, denominated as "Best Performing Governor of the Year" or similar titles in which recipients are selected through processes that appear, in many instances, to reflect commercial arrangements rather than independent assessment.

Dare (2007) provided an insider account of financial patronage in Nigerian journalism, documenting how "celebratory coverage" purchased through event sponsorship had become a normalised feature of media-political relations. Akinfeleye (2008) argued that institutionalised patronage of this kind represents the collapse of the distinction between journalism and public relations at the organisational level. The mechanics provide legal and reputational cover for financial transfers: the official's office sponsors the event through formal contracts; the media organisation provides sustained favourable editorial attention. Unlike individual brown-envelope payments, which are universally condemned in professional codes but difficult to eradicate, the award industry

operates through corporate accounts and is effectively immune to prosecution. Where this pattern becomes institutionalised, the fourth estate function is not simply compromised; it is repurposed.

Reports emerged in late 2025 that the Presidential Fiscal Policy and Tax Reforms Committee launched an "Excellence in Tax Reform Reporting Award" offering substantial cash prizes to journalists covering government tax reform initiatives. If accurate, the structural logic is consistent with the award industry pattern identified by Dare (2007): journalists covering a contentious policy area face a financial incentive structure in which government-defined criteria attract monetary reward, creating at minimum the appearance of a conflict of interest.

The award industry's systemic prevalence is documented anecdotally in the literature (Akinfeleye, 2008; Dare, 2007). The analytical implication is that award-dependent media organisations may function not primarily as news organisations engaged in occasional corrupt practices but as patronage-brokering organisations that also produce editorial content.

The Data Boy Phenomenon and Epistemic Exhaustion

The digital sphere was anticipated to function as an emancipatory supplement to a captured mainstream media. In Nigeria, this hope has been complicated by coordinated political disinformation, colloquially known as the "Data Boy" phenomenon. Grey-literature reports from the 2023 general election cycle documented formally organised social media operations across major political parties, with paid influencers earning up to N500,000 monthly to amplify partisan narratives and suppress reporting on their principals' misconduct (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023). These sources are not peer-reviewed and are used here as illustrative contextual evidence only.

The Nigerian case is consistent with global patterns documented by Bradshaw and Howard (2019), whose systematic mapping across seventy countries established computational propaganda as a global phenomenon. What distinguishes the Nigerian case may be less the existence of such

networks than their integration with broader structures of political patronage: the same actors who benefit from collateralized censorship in the mainstream media appear to fund digital disinformation operations targeting outlets attempting accountability reporting.

This paper proposes the concept of epistemic exhaustion to name a hypothesised audience-level mechanism linking coordinated disinformation to civic disengagement. Existing frameworks leave this question partially addressed: Benkler et al. (2018) focus on ecosystem structure rather than individual cognitive outcomes; Tufekci (2017) addresses structural features of digital publics but not the specific experience of confronting irreconcilable accounts; Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) classify false content by intent but do not theorise cumulative audience effects. Epistemic exhaustion hypothesises a distinct outcome: under sustained exposure to coordinated contradictory messaging, audiences retreat from active source evaluation into generalised scepticism, a posture of non-engagement that serves actors who benefit from reduced public demand for accountability. The concept is offered explicitly as a hypothesis requiring empirical investigation.

The Extraction Filter: Digital Platform Revenue Capture

A complete analysis of the conditions constraining Nigerian journalism must consider the extraction of advertising revenue by global digital platforms. Nigeria's total advertising spend is approaching \$1 billion annually, with approximately \$340 million captured by digital platforms (Nigerian Press Organisation, 2026; Punch Newspapers, 2026). This figure originates from an advocacy body and should be treated as an approximate indicator. By 2025, social media alone was projected to command \$131 million in Nigerian ad spend, with online video and banner advertising, territories dominated by Google and Meta projected to account for an additional \$269 million.

The extraction filter operates through a mechanism with no direct equivalent in the original Propaganda Model. Global platforms deliver Nigerian audiences to advertisers, capture the revenue, and reinvest minimally in the Nigerian newsrooms whose content generates the social media

conversation from which platform companies derive value. As newsrooms' revenue base contracts, their dependence on remaining income sources intensifies principally state advertising and proprietorial support, precisely the mechanisms through which collateralized censorship operates. The extraction filter therefore deepens the conditions analysed rather than operating as a separate phenomenon.

This dynamic may affect independent digital outlets more severely than mainstream organisations, which benefit from proprietorial subsidies and state advertising that independent outlets lack. Outlets such as *Premium Times*, *The Cable*, and the Foundation for Investigative Journalism rely more heavily on the advertising revenue that platforms capture, most severely constraining the media most committed to accountability journalism. Comparative policy responses, Australia's News Media Bargaining Code (2021), South Africa's Competition Commission Inquiry (2023), and analogous European Union frameworks—demonstrate that regulatory intervention is technically feasible, though the transferability of any such framework to Nigeria depends on political and institutional conditions that cannot be assumed.

The Legal Architecture of Press Suppression

The conditions identified in previous sections are reinforced by a legal architecture providing formal instruments for suppressing critical reporting. While the 1999 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression under Section 39, the Official Secrets Act, the Broadcasting Code administered by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), the Cybercrime Act, and criminal libel provisions collectively create a legal environment in which critical journalism carries substantial personal and financial risk. These instruments function primarily through the anticipatory self-censorship they induce rather than through frequent prosecution.

The NBC's Broadcasting Code empowers the Commission to sanction or suspend broadcasting licences on grounds including content deemed "inimical to public order," a formulation

sufficiently elastic to encompass reporting that government officials find uncomfortable. The #EndSARS protests of October 2020 illustrate this dynamic: the NBC issued guidelines prohibiting content that might "embarrass individuals, organizations, government, or cause disaffection," and most mainstream broadcasters fell into line (Columbia Journalism Review, 2020). Those that did not, namely Channels Television, AIT, and Arise TV, were each fined N3 million for broadcasting user-generated content during the crisis (Nigerian Broadcasting Commission, 2020). That the sanctioned outlets were those that covered the protests confirms that the regulatory mechanism operates through anticipatory restraint as much as post-hoc punishment.

Nigeria's Cybercrime Act proved similarly broad in its application to journalists. On September 18, 2025, police detained Fejiro Oliver at his Abuja office and flew him to Asaba, charging him with cyberbullying over Facebook publications concerning the Delta State Governor; bail conditions of fifteen million naira with two sureties were beyond his means (CPJ, 2025). Friday James Alefia, publisher of Naija News Today, was arrested days later on five counts under the same Act for reports alleging a lawmaker's involvement in misconduct (CPJ, 2025).

The case of Omoyele Sowore, founder of *Sahara Reporters*, remains the most extensively documented instance of legal weaponisation against a Nigerian journalist in the Fourth Republic. Arrested in August 2019 following his organisation of the #RevolutionNow protests, Sowore was charged with treasonable felony and held in defiance of a Federal High Court bail order (CPJ, 2019). The case dragged through the courts for nearly five years before the Attorney General filed a notice of discontinuance and the Federal High Court formally discharged him in February 2024 (The Cable, 2024). The prolonged detention imposed significant personal, professional, and financial costs on a journalist whose publication had consistently produced accountability reporting. The deterrent effect extended beyond Sowore himself: the message transmitted to the wider journalistic field was that any journalist could face similar consequences.

Together, these cases illustrate the Flak 2.0 mechanism: legal machinery deployed to impose costs on individual journalists while transmitting a deterrent signal to the wider journalistic field.

Countervailing Developments and the Political Economy of Reform

Significant, if fragile, countervailing developments exist within digital journalism. *Premium Times*, established in 2011, has produced investigative journalism of substantial public interest value its reporting on the diversion of military procurement funds contributed to the removal of a National Security Adviser. *The Cable*, *Peoples Gazette*, and the Foundation for Investigative Journalism (FIJ) have similarly maintained commitments to accountability journalism, demonstrating that independent investigative reporting is possible within the Nigerian context, even under severe institutional pressure.

These digital outlets are not immune to the pressures analysed in this article. They face sustained legal harassment, financial sustainability challenges, and vulnerability to donor priorities. The revenue extraction analysed in Section 4.4 may affect them more severely than mainstream organisations, which benefit from proprietorial subsidies and state advertising that independent outlets lack. Donor funding, while enabling important work, may also shape editorial priorities in ways that are not fully independent.

The analysis suggests several categories of reform that would logically address the mechanisms identified: ownership legislation prohibiting serving public officials from holding majority stakes in news organisations; independent mechanisms for state advertising allocation; amendment of the Cybercrime Act's Section 24; and platform bargaining frameworks requiring global digital platforms to contribute to the sustainability of domestic newsrooms. Comparative frameworks demonstrate that regulatory intervention in media structures is technically feasible.

However, the reforms described would directly constrain the interests of the political and economic actors who currently control the institutions through which such reforms would need to be

enacted. Reform becomes possible when the costs of maintaining the current system come to exceed the benefits for enough powerful actors through electoral competition, civil society pressure, or crisis events that delegitimise the current arrangement.

Conclusion

This article has proposed that the Nigerian mainstream media's capacity to fulfil the fourth estate role tends to be constrained through a convergence of conceptually distinct but mutually reinforcing mechanisms. At the core of this analysis is collateralized censorship: the tendency toward editorial silence on matters touching the primary commercial and political interests of media owners, whose investments in sectors dependent on government regulation create implicit collateral posted against accountability journalism. This core mechanism operates within a broader ecology of constraint that includes state advertising dependency, the award industry's institutionalisation of financial patronage, coordinated digital disinformation networks, global platform revenue extraction, and a legal architecture of suppression.

The article offers three principal theoretical contributions. Collateralized censorship extends existing political economy frameworks by specifying a mechanism particularly salient where media ownership and political-economic power are tightly intertwined. The Digital-Propaganda Model adapts Herman and Chomsky's framework for the contemporary Global South context by adding two filters: Flak 2.0, encompassing organised digital harassment and legal weaponisation, and the extraction filter, addressing platform revenue capture. Negative agenda-setting reorients agenda-setting theory toward the conditions of production, asking what issues incentives systematically remove from consideration before they can reach audiences. The secondary concept, epistemic exhaustion, hypothesises the audience-level effects of sustained coordinated disinformation: a breakdown of the individual's capacity to evaluate source credibility producing a retreat into generalised scepticism.

These arguments are theoretical propositions, not empirical findings. The article includes no original data collection; its claims require systematic investigation through content analysis, journalist interviews, and audience studies, defining a research agenda rather than invalidating the conceptual framework.

The fourth estate function is not institutionally extinct in Nigeria. Digital investigative outlets sustain a residual but authentic accountability journalism in spaces that mainstream conditions have foreclosed. Yet these spaces are fragile, made more so by the very mechanisms this article has analysed. The question Akinfeleye (2008) posed, whether the Nigerian press has become the fourth estate of the realm or the fourth estate of the wreck admits no single answer. The mainstream media, captured through the mechanisms this article has analysed, have largely abandoned the fourth estate function. Yet the function persists, precariously but authentically, in spaces that analysis can identify and that political action might sustain and expand. The task for scholarship is to analyse the conditions under which that persistence is possible and the conditions under which it might become something more.

References

- Adeyemo, T. (2024, June 17). Nigeria. In N. Newman, R. Fletcher, C. T. Robertson, A. Ross Arguedas, & R. K. Nielsen (Eds.), *Digital news report 2024*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/nigeria>
- African Media Barometer. (2008). *African Media Barometer Nigeria 2008*. Media Institute of Southern Africa.
- African Media Barometer. (2011). *African Media Barometer Nigeria 2011*. Media Institute of Southern Africa.
- Akinfeleye, R. A. (2008). *Fourth Estate of the Realm or Fourth Estate of the Wreck: Imperative of social responsibility of the press*. University of Lagos Press.
- Akpojivi, U., & Akintola, O. (2025). The Nigerian press and its plutocratic relationship. In H. M. Mabweazara & B. Pearson (Eds.), *Media capture in Africa and Latin America*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Baker, C. E. (1994). *Advertising and a democratic press*. Princeton University Press.

- Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Berger, G. (2010). Problematising 'media development' as a bandwagon gets rolling. *International Communication Gazette*, 72(7), 547–565.
- Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation*. Oxford Internet Institute.
- Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation*. Oxford Internet Institute.
- Carlyle, T. (1841). *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history*. James Fraser.
- Centre for Democracy and Development. (2023). *Online operations: Nigeria's 2023 social media election campaigns*. CDD-West Africa.
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (2019, August 26). *Police in Nigeria assault, arrest journalists covering #RevolutionNow protests*. Committee to Protect Journalists. Retrieved from <https://cpj.org/2019/08/police-in-nigeria-assault-arrest-journalists-cover/>
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (2025, November 14). 3 Nigerian journalists detained on cybercrime allegations, despite reform. *Committee to Protect Journalists*. Retrieved from <https://cpj.org/2025/11/3-nigerian-journalists-detained-on-cybercrime-allegations-despite-reform/>
- Dare, S. (2007). *Guerrilla journalism: Dispatches from the underground*. Xlibris.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 219–245.
- Golding, P., & Murdock, G. (1991). Culture, communication, and political economy. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (pp. 15–32). Edward Arnold.
- Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2008). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. The Bodly Head.
- Ishaku, J., & Shem, W. (2022). Public interest or advertiser's interest: On whose side is the media? *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 6(2), 177–182.
- McCombs, M. E. (2004). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion*. Polity Press.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.
- Media Rights Agenda. (2026, January 29). *The reign of impunity: 2025 annual report on freedom of expression in Nigeria*. Media Rights Agenda. Retrieved from <https://mediarightsagenda.org/mra-releases-2025-annual-report-on-free-expression-decries-reign-of-impunity/>

- Murdock, G., & Golding, P. (1979). Capitalism, communication and class relations. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Mass communication and society* (pp. 12–43). Sage Publications.
- Musa, M., & Mohammed, J. (2004). The political economy of media ownership in Nigeria. In P. N. Thomas & Z. Nain (Eds.), *Who owns the media? Global trends and local resistances* (pp. n.p.). Zed Books/Southbound.
- Nigerian Broadcasting Commission. (2020, October). *NBC sanctions broadcast stations over #EndSARS coverage* [Press statement]. Nigerian Broadcasting Commission.
- Nigerian Press Organisation. (2026, February 4). *NPO to Tinubu, NASS: Shield Nigerian press from global digital giants* [Press statement]. Nigerian Press Organisation.
- Olukotun, A. (2002). Authoritarian state, crisis of democratization and the underground media in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 101(404), 317–342. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/101.404.317>
- Omenugha, K. A., & Oji, M. (2008). News commercialization, ethics and objectivity in journalism practice in Nigeria: Strange bedfellows? *Estudos em Comunicação*, 3, 13–28. Retrieved from <http://ec.ubi.pt/ec/03/pdf/omenugha-oji-news-commercialization.pdf>
- Omu, F. I. A. (1978). *Press and politics in Nigeria, 1880–1937*. Longman Group Limited.
- Punch Newspapers. (2026, February 9). Why Nigeria must reclaim its info sovereignty from Big Tech. *Punch Newspapers*. Retrieved from <https://punchng.com/tinubu-reclaim-nigerias-info-sovereignty-from-big-tech/>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2023). *World press freedom index 2023*. RSF. Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/index>
- Smythe, D. W. (1981). *Dependency road: Communications, capitalism, consciousness, and Canada*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- The Cable. (2024, February 19). Treasonable felony: Court discharges Sowore, orders DSS to release seized items. *The Cable*. Retrieved from <https://www.thecable.ng/treasonable-felony-court-discharges-sowore-orders-dss-to-release-seized-items/>
- Tijani, M. (2023). *Information wins elections: Lessons from the Centre's 2023 Election War Room*. Centre for Democracy and Development.
- Tomaselli, K. G., & Dunn, H. S. (2001). *Media, democracy and renewal in southern Africa*. International Academic Publishers.
- Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.
- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Council of Europe.