Function of the Media in Shaping the Future of Democracy in Nigeria: Enhancing Electoral Integrity through the Nigerian Print Media

Mainasara Yakubu Kurfi   (*Corresponding author1)

Department of Mass Communication, Bayero University, Kano,

PMB 3011, Gwarzo Road, Kano State, Nigeria

E-mail: mykurfi@gmail.com

Adamkolo Mohammed Ibrahim   (*Corresponding author2)

Department of Mass Communication, University of Maiduguri,

PMB 1069 Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria

E-mail: adamkolo@unimaid.edu.ng

Abubakar Tijjani Ibrahim

Department of Mass Communication, Kano State Polytechnic

PMB 3401, Kano, Nigeria

E-mail: sadiqtijjanii@gmail.com

Abstract

The media is pivotal in democratic consolidation, particularly during elections, ensuring transparency and credibility. In Nigeria, the print media plays a vital role in supporting democracy by facilitating political discourse, educating voters and watchdogging electoral processes. This paper examines the responsibilities of the print media, including voter education, campaign facilitation and ensuring electoral transparency. It also addresses challenges such as maintaining impartiality in a diverse society, competing with digital media and navigating the mistrust between the electorate and political actors. While the print media has contributed significantly to democratisation, issues like electoral violence, voter apathy and media manipulation persist. The findings emphasise the need for the print media to adapt to new technological realities and maintain unbiased reporting to support Nigeria's democratic growth, offering recommendations to enhance its capacity as a credible platform for electoral processes.

Keywords: Print media, elections, democracy, voter education, Nigeria, electoral process, political participation, media transparency.

1. Introduction

The media serve as the backbone of democratic systems, ensuring that the electorate is informed, empowered and engaged in the political process (Kurfi, 2010). As stated by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), media are not merely facilitators of information dissemination but are central to the functioning of a democracy (CIHRS, 2011; Oboh, 2016). This is particularly evident during electoral periods when the press plays a pivotal role in shaping political discourse and influencing public opinion (Oboh, 2016). In the context of Nigeria, the print media have been instrumental in advocating for transparency and accountability, thus contributing significantly to democratic consolidation. Their role extends beyond mere reportage, acting as a watchdog over electoral processes and fostering public debates that are critical to free and fair elections.

The importance of print media in democratic systems cannot be overstated. Universally, the media facilitate the dissemination of electoral information, providing platforms for public debate, voter education and campaign coverage (Agba, 2007; INEC News, 2018). This responsibility includes reporting on electoral campaigns,

scrutinising electoral management and educating voters on their rights and the mechanics of the voting process. In this regard, the Nigerian print media have played a key role in enhancing the transparency and credibility of elections by ensuring that the public is informed about the activities of electoral bodies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Agba, 2007).

At the 2005 UNESCO World Press Day Conference in Dakar, the Dakar Declaration underscored the critical role of independent and pluralistic media in promoting good governance. The Declaration emphasised that media transparency and accountability are essential for the proper functioning of democracies (CIHRS, 2011). This is particularly pertinent in developing countries like Nigeria, where the media have the added responsibility of fostering civic engagement amidst a relatively young democracy. Despite its challenges, the Nigerian press continues to uphold its duty to the electorate, providing vital information that shapes public opinion and influences political participation (Oboh, 2016).

The role of the print media in elections is multifaceted. It encompasses providing platforms for political parties to communicate their messages, educating voters on how to exercise their democratic rights and scrutinising the entire electoral process to ensure fairness (INEC News, 2018; Iredia, 2007). Furthermore, the media are expected to maintain objectivity, offering balanced and informed analyses to empower citizens to make educated electoral choices. In Nigeria, the print media have consistently taken on these roles, often serving as the primary source of electoral information, particularly in regions where other forms of media are less accessible (Oboh, 2016).

This paper aims to explore the historical and contemporary role of the Nigerian print media in elections, analysing their influence on political participation and democratic governance. It examines the challenges facing the print media in fulfilling their electoral mandate and suggests ways forward to strengthen their role in Nigeria's electoral processes. The objectives of the paper are to analyse the role of the Nigerian press in safeguarding democratic principles through electoral reporting and voter education; assess the challenges faced by the Nigerian print media in fulfilling their responsibilities during elections; and propose strategies for strengthening the role of the Nigerian print media in promoting free and fair elections.

This paper is organised into several key sections, each addressing different aspects of the role of the Nigerian print media in the electoral process. Following the introduction, which sets the context for the discussion, the paper delves into the critical analysis of the current practices of the print media and its impact on electoral transparency and voter engagement. The subsequent sections provide a detailed examination of the theoretical background, historical challenges faced by the media, including issues of bias and voter apathy, as well as the recent legal and technological advancements shaping the electoral topography. The paper then transitions into a thorough exploration of the ongoing challenges confronting the print media, which are discussed comprehensively in a section preceding the conclusion. This section highlights the persistent obstacles, including political bias and inadequate candidate coverage, and discusses potential strategies for overcoming these hurdles. The conclusion synthesises the findings, reflecting on the role of the print media in advancing democratic principles and proposing recommendations for future improvements.

2. Theoretical Grounding

In the mid-20th century, developing nations, including those in the third world, widely adopted the social responsibility theory of the press. This theory, rooted in the work of the Hutchins Commission on the Freedom of the Press in 1947, emphasises the media's duty to serve the public good while ensuring freedom and fulfilling societal obligations. The theory gained prominence through the work of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, who argued that pure libertarianism had become outdated, advocating for a more ethical and accountable media framework (Siebert et al., 1956). The core principles of social responsibility theory include the obligation to serve society, maintain truthfulness, accuracy, fairness and objectivity, and adhere to professional ethics (Ineji et al., 2021).

The social responsibility theory, introduced by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956, evolved from concerns about the limitations of the libertarian approach. It posits that while freedom is essential, it carries inherent obligations. The press, which is granted a privileged status, is expected to fulfil functions such as providing information and supporting democratic processes (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). This theory has since become integral to media environments in developing countries. Initially influenced by European perspectives, it took shape through the Commission on the Freedom of the Press in the United States (Ineji et al., 2021).

The theory promotes press freedom without censorship while advocating for media regulation based on social responsibility. Content is filtered through a public obligation lens, ensuring the press meets societal needs. This

shift towards professionalism in journalism marked a departure from the libertarian model, as unregulated press freedom had not delivered expected societal benefits (Johnson & Johnson, 2019; Obagwu & Idris, 2019). With the concentration of media power in a few hands, self-regulation became essential, supported by external structures to ensure accountability.

2.1 Basic Assumptions of the Social Responsibility Theory

Denis McQuail, a leading scholar in media studies, summarised the key principles of social responsibility theory in 2005 (McQuail, 2005). These principles include:

- The media must fulfil certain obligations to society.
- These obligations are to be met by maintaining high standards of truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity and balance.
- The media should be self-regulating, operating within the framework of law and societal norms.
- Media content should avoid inciting crime, violence, or harm to minority groups.
- The media should represent a plurality of views, ensuring that diverse perspectives are given a platform.
- Society has the right to expect high standards of performance from the media, and intervention can be justified to protect the public good.
- Journalists and media professionals must be accountable to society, not just to their employers or the marketplace.

Journalism, under this theory, is expected to serve the public interest by informing, educating, facilitating debate, fostering community leadership and empowering citizens. These expectations, initially outlined by the Hutchins Commission in 1947, have evolved to include a range of functions, from acting as a government watchdog to promoting social development (Johnson & Johnson, 2019).

However, social responsibility theory faces limitations, particularly concerning journalistic accountability. While media owners and editors influence content, public expectations of journalistic integrity must remain uncompromised. The concentration of media ownership in a few large businesses raises concerns about monopolies and information control. Journalists, viewed as trustees of the public, must balance promoting public interest with operating within a system that grants them freedom of expression (Galtung, 2020; Baran & Davis, 2012).

In developing countries like Nigeria, the print media often struggles with these challenges. "Statement journalism," where contradictory statements are reported without verification, creates confusion among readers and diminishes clarity on key issues. This focus on political controversies over investigative reporting limits the media's capacity to drive societal reform (Ineji et al., 2021).

The social responsibility theory outlines several key functions for the media, including facilitating public discourse on political matters, providing accurate information for informed decision-making, acting as a watchdog over government actions, supporting the economic system through advertising, offering culturally aligned entertainment and maintaining financial independence to avoid undue influence from special interests (Siebert et al., 1956; Folarin, 1998). These functions position the media as central to societal well-being, requiring media professionals to uphold principles of impartiality, truthfulness and fairness to meet public expectations (Ineji et al., 2021).

3. Media and the Electoral Process in Nigeria

The pivotal role that the print media plays in supporting democracy cannot be overstated. Some scholars assert that democracy itself is unattainable without a free press. This assertion is based on the recognition that the media monitors, supports and strengthens every stage of the electoral process – from voter registration to voting day, and from the announcement of results to the shaping of public opinion in the post-election period. A credible election is not solely dependent on the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) ability to ensure that voters are informed well, and can exercise their rights; rather, credibility hinges on whether voters have access to adequate information about party policies, candidates and the electoral process as a whole. This includes the level of public debate and the quality of information that guides voters in making informed choices (Balkin, 1999; INEC News, 2018; Oboh, 2016).

In its capacity as an ombudsman, the print media does not only ensures that voters are well informed but also that all electoral stakeholders adhere to established rules and international best practices. The media's duty is to

provide comprehensive coverage of the election process, while simultaneously protecting voters' rights to accurate and complete information, fostering debates and engaging stakeholders at every level (Norris, 1997; Oboh, 2016).

In safeguarding voter rights, the print media must also protect the rights of political parties and candidates by ensuring equal access to media platforms for public engagement. Furthermore, INEC should view the media as a partner in the quest for credible elections, particularly in areas such as voter education and promoting adherence to electoral codes of conduct. Thus, the print media serves as an essential communication channel for voters, political parties, candidates, INEC, civil society organisations and other stakeholders, playing an informal regulatory role throughout the electoral process (INEC News, 2018; Swigger, 2012).

To fulfil these roles effectively, the print media must maintain high standards of professionalism, accuracy and impartiality in its reporting. Without such professionalism, the media could become a hindrance rather than a facilitator of democracy. Consequently, this section delves into the specific ways in which the print media shapes election processes in Nigeria.

4. Functions of the Print Media in Elections

The media play a critical role in democracy, particularly during elections. The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (2021) emphasises that the media, especially the print media, are essential for democratic consolidation, serving as both watchdogs and influencers of political discourse (Smith, 2023). Globally, the print media's functions in disseminating information, facilitating public debate and educating voters are pivotal in ensuring free and fair elections. A free and objective media enhances transparency by providing essential electoral information, while a constrained media can undermine both the electoral process and democracy itself (Agba, 2007; Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2021; INEC News, 2018; Iredia, 2007).

The 2005 UNESCO World Press Day Conference in Dakar highlighted the importance of independent and pluralistic media in promoting transparency, accountability and participation, all of which are fundamental to good governance and human rights-based development (UNESCO, 2005). This perspective aligns with the print media's responsibilities in supporting democratic elections, such as educating voters about their rights, reporting on campaigns, providing platforms for political communication and ensuring fair electoral processes (Agba, 2007; INEC News, 2018).

Elections require not only voting but also informed participation. The media's role in providing comprehensive information and fostering political inclusion is vital for empowering voters and holding electoral stakeholders accountable (Oboh, 2016). Although the print media are not the sole source of electoral information, they significantly influence the political agenda, particularly during elections when their ability to shape and sometimes manipulate public opinion becomes more pronounced (Agba, 2007; Oboh, 2016). The impartiality and objectivity of the print media are crucial, as they must serve as neutral platforms for diverse viewpoints rather than as mouthpieces for any government or candidate (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2021; INEC News, 2018).

Election observers often assess media access and coverage as indicators of election fairness, employing statistical and discourse analysis techniques to monitor media performance (Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2021; Oboh, 2016). By providing accurate information, the media empower citizens, enabling informed decisions that drive national transformation and enhance the legitimacy of government (Johnson & Johnson, 2019). Consequently, the media play a pivotal role in fostering an understanding of the political, social, economic and cultural dynamics essential for nation-building (Ineji et al., 2021; Obagwu & Idris, 2019).

5. Code of Conduct on Media Engagement, Rule of Engagement and the Press and Freedom of Speech during Elections

International organisations like the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Commonwealth Election Broadcasting Guidelines (CEBG) and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression (UNSRFOE) have established codes of conduct to guide media engagement during elections. These guidelines aim to ensure the media's constructive role in democratic processes by informing the electorate to make informed decisions (IFJ, 2024; CEBG, 2020). The print media, as a critical information conduit, functions as a watchdog, enhancing transparency and accountability in democracy. Through agenda-setting, it influences public opinion, thereby contributing to credible and inclusive elections when used responsibly (UNDP, 2023).

However, this influential position also makes print media susceptible to manipulation by political entities, which can skew public opinion towards specific issues or candidates, potentially exacerbating election-related conflict. Such bias can undermine the integrity of the electoral process, affecting everything from the electoral system's design to its legal framework (UNDP, 2023). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) plays a vital role in safeguarding press independence within electoral processes and in effectively using the media to communicate with the public. INEC's management of these responsibilities significantly affects the conduct and public perception of elections, which are the result of meticulous preparation over electoral cycles (UNDP, 2023). Communications and interactions with the media are integral to INEC's operations throughout the electoral cycle, as shown in Figure 1.

Electoral practitioners must navigate these challenges in collaboration with other democratic actors. The expansion of social media further complicates how information is disseminated and public opinion is shaped, affecting both public communication and media coverage of elections (UNDP, 2023).

Freedom of speech, as interpreted by the UN Human Rights Committee, covers all forms of expression, including political discourse, satire and cultural expression, even if perceived as offensive. This protection is crucial within democratic societies, where political speech holds significant value. The UN Human Rights Committee emphasises the necessity of a free press, which is vital for enabling public participation in democratic processes (UNHRC, 2022). Unequal access to media resources among candidates can undermine the electorate's ability to choose representatives freely. Media pluralism during election campaigns, ensured by balanced coverage, is justified as it enhances freedom of speech (UNDP, 2023).
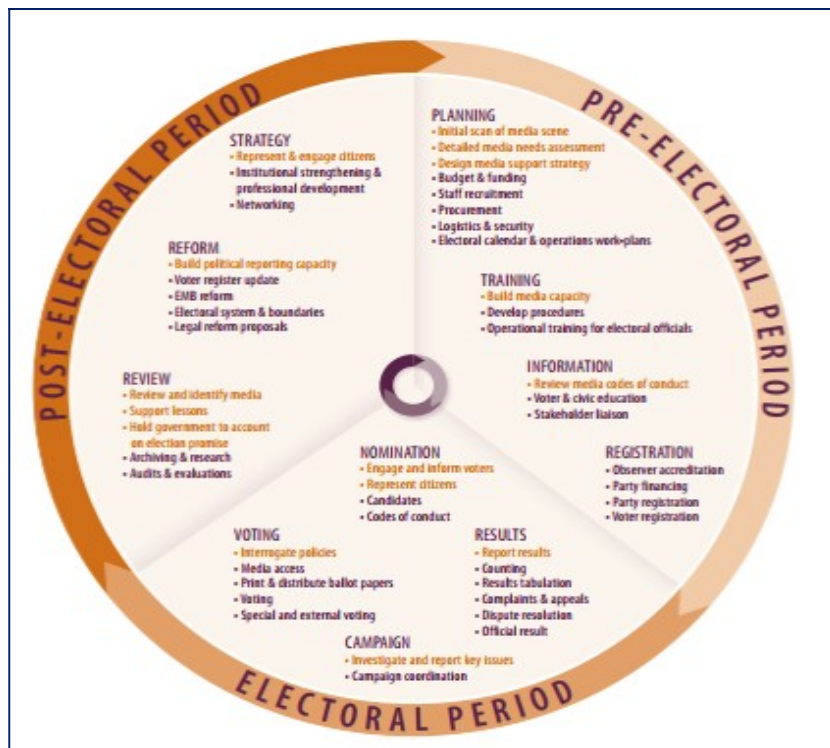

Figure 1: The media and the electoral cycle (*UNDP, 2023, p. 2*).

A 2022 joint statement by several international bodies stresses that the media should freely report on election-related matters and that political figures should tolerate higher criticism levels during elections. Publicly owned media, especially public service broadcasters, have a duty to inform the electorate about electoral matters, ensure impartiality and provide equitable media access for all parties (UNHRC, 2022).

Restrictions on freedom of speech, such as prior restraint and subsequent penalties, are justified only under specific circumstances, such as hate speech or national security concerns (UNESCO, 2005). Legal and regulatory frameworks play a crucial role in maintaining media freedom and facilitating political communication during elections. A balanced regulatory environment, supported by strong legal guarantees of media independence, is

essential for ensuring fair electoral coverage and preventing government interference (Jones, 2022).

Three main principles govern media coverage of elections: voter rights, ensuring the electorate is informed; contestant rights, allowing equal media access; and media rights, upholding the freedom to report and critique political platforms while maintaining accuracy and balance (Kužel, 2020, 2023).

6. Key Media Challenges and Solution

6.1 Challenges

The media environment in Nigeria, like many parts of the world, is fraught with numerous challenges, many of which have a profound impact on the practice of journalism and the role of the press in society. These challenges range from political interference and economic instability to the rise of digital media and fake news. Each of these issues significantly affects the credibility, sustainability and independence of media outlets across the country.

One of the most critical challenges facing the media in Nigeria is political interference. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Nigeria ranks 123rd out of 180 countries in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index (RSF, 2023). This poor ranking reflects the increasing constraints placed on journalists by the government, especially around sensitive political issues such as elections, corruption and security. The Nigerian government has been known to censor journalists and shut down media organisations that criticise its policies. A prime example occurred in 2019 when the government temporarily suspended the operations of DAAR Communications, owners of Africa Independent Television (AIT) and RayPower FM, for alleged "divisive content and violation of broadcast standards" (Amnesty International, 2019). Such actions raise concerns about the ability of the press to function freely without fear of retribution.

Economic instability is another significant challenge. Many media organisations in Nigeria struggle to stay financially viable due to the country's economic downturns. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that the advertising market, a key source of revenue for media outlets, is often monopolised by a few large corporations. According to Statista (2022), the advertising revenue in Nigeria in 2021, was approximately $420 million, which is a fraction of the advertising revenues in larger African markets like South Africa, which generated nearly $1.4 billion in the same year. As a result, smaller media houses, particularly print newspapers, are finding it difficult to compete and often resort to sensationalism to attract readership and advertising revenue.

The rise of digital media has also presented both opportunities and challenges for traditional media. While digital platforms allow for wider dissemination of news, they also pose the risk of diluting journalistic standards. In particular, the speed at which information is published online often leads to errors and the spread of unverified information. Moreover, with the increased consumption of news through social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, traditional news outlets have seen their audience and revenue dwindle. A 2018 study by the BBC noted that 77% of Nigerian adults receive their news through social media, while only 30% regularly purchase newspapers (BBC News, 2018). This shift has forced traditional media to adapt, but many have struggled to keep up with the fast-paced nature of digital news, leading to a loss of credibility in some cases.

Fake news and misinformation have also emerged as a substantial challenge. The spread of false information, particularly around sensitive issues like elections, religion and ethnicity, has exacerbated tensions in an already divided society. The proliferation of fake news became particularly pronounced during the 2019 general elections, when multiple fabricated stories circulated on social media, often with the intent to manipulate public opinion. A study by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) found that 29% of Nigerians had encountered fake news during the election period, with misinformation largely targeting political candidates (CDD, 2019). This has not only undermined the integrity of the media but has also made it more difficult for the public to distinguish between credible and false information.

The threat to journalist safety is another pressing issue. Journalists in Nigeria often operate in a hostile environment, especially when covering corruption, terrorism, or conflicts. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least 12 journalists have been killed in Nigeria since 1992, with many more facing harassment, intimidation and detention (CPJ, 2023). The #EndSARS protests in 2020 further highlighted the precarious situation for journalists, as numerous media personnel were attacked while covering the protests and some media houses, such as Arise TV, were fined for their coverage of the events (Human Rights Watch, 2021). This hostile environment has led many journalists to practice self-censorship, further compromising the integrity of the media.

Moreover, the regulatory environment in Nigeria has been increasingly restrictive. The Nigerian Broadcasting

Commission (NBC) has imposed fines on several media organisations for allegedly violating broadcast regulations, particularly in relation to political reporting. For example, in 2020, Channels TV, AIT and Arise TV were collectively fined ₦9 million for their coverage of the #EndSARS protests, with the NBC accusing them of broadcasting "unverified footage" (NBC, 2020). Such regulatory pressures, while aimed at ensuring compliance with ethical standards, have been criticised for stifling free speech and creating a climate of fear among media practitioners.

6.2 Solution

Addressing the numerous challenges faced by the Nigerian media will require a multifaceted approach that involves the government, media organisations, civil society and the public. By fostering an environment where freedom of the press is protected, media outlets are financially viable and journalists are able to operate without fear, the integrity of the media can be restored and strengthened. Below are several key steps that could help resolve the critical challenges faced by the Nigerian media:

i) *Strengthening Legal Protections for Journalists*

One of the most effective ways to address political interference and threats to journalists' safety is through stronger legal protections. The Nigerian government must take proactive steps to enshrine press freedom in law, ensuring that journalists are able to report on political and social issues without fear of censorship or retribution. The Freedom of Information Act (2011), while a good starting point, has been criticised for not being fully implemented. For instance, the law mandates the release of public information, yet many government agencies have been slow or reluctant to comply (Odoh, 2018). Reforming this legislation and ensuring strict penalties for its violation would empower journalists to access information freely.

Furthermore, the judiciary must be encouraged to treat cases involving media suppression or attacks on journalists with urgency and fairness. Media advocacy organisations like Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) have emphasised the importance of ensuring that cases of journalist harassment and murder are properly investigated and prosecuted (CPJ, 2023). For example, the unsolved murder cases of journalists in Nigeria reflect a worrying trend. To deter future attacks, there must be accountability for those who intimidate or harm journalists.

ii) *Promoting Media Financial Sustainability*

Economic instability continues to undermine the financial viability of many media organisations. One potential solution is to diversify revenue streams. In addition to relying on advertising revenue, Nigerian media houses could explore subscription models, sponsored content and partnerships with international organisations. For example, several news outlets in Europe and North America, such as The Guardian (UK) and The New York Times, have successfully implemented paywall systems to fund investigative journalism (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016).

Local media outlets could also seek grants from international bodies that promote press freedom and democracy, such as the Open Society Foundations or the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ), which offer funding for investigative journalism and media innovation projects. By broadening their financial base, Nigerian media outlets can maintain independence and reduce their vulnerability to economic downturns.

iii) *Investing in Digital Transformation*

The rise of digital media offers both a challenge and an opportunity for traditional Nigerian media outlets. To stay competitive, traditional print and broadcast media need to invest in digital transformation. Media organisations should establish strong online presences by creating user-friendly websites, optimising content for mobile devices and engaging with audiences on social media platforms.

Moreover, training journalists in digital literacy and the use of new media technologies will improve the quality and reach of their reporting. A good example is the BBC Media Action programme in Nigeria, which provides training to local journalists on digital reporting and fact-checking techniques (BBC Media Action, 2021). Such initiatives not only enhance the skills of journalists but also improve their capacity to counter the spread of fake news.

iv) *Combatting Fake News with Fact-Checking Initiatives*

To tackle the pervasive problem of fake news and misinformation, it is important to promote media literacy among the public and strengthen fact-checking mechanisms. Fact-checking organisations such as Africa Check and Dubawa have made significant strides in Nigeria by verifying news stories and debunking misinformation (Dubawa, 2021). However, their efforts need to be more widespread and supported by media organisations and

the government.

Public education campaigns should be launched to raise awareness about the dangers of misinformation, particularly during elections and other politically sensitive periods. For example, Finland, which is known for its successful fight against fake news, has integrated media literacy into its national curriculum, teaching students how to evaluate information from an early age critically (European Commission, 2018). A similar approach could be adopted in Nigeria by incorporating media literacy into school curricula and community outreach programmes.

v) *Ensuring Regulatory Reforms*

The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) must be reformed to ensure that it operates independently and not used as a tool for government censorship. Current regulatory practices, such as the imposition of fines on media organisations for reporting sensitive political issues, undermine the ability of the media to perform its watchdog role effectively (NBC, 2020).

A transparent regulatory framework that supports press freedom while ensuring ethical reporting standards is essential. Civil society organisations and international media watchdogs should collaborate with the NBC to revise its policies in line with international best practices. For example, the Ofcom model in the UK, which regulates broadcasting without direct government interference, could serve as a model for reforming the NBC.

vi) *Improving Journalist Safety*

Improving the safety of journalists in Nigeria is paramount. Media organisations should adopt security protocols to protect their staff, especially those reporting in conflict zones or covering sensitive political issues. In addition, the government must demonstrate its commitment to protecting journalists by enforcing laws that criminalise attacks on media personnel and prosecuting those responsible for violence against journalists.

International cooperation with organisations like UNESCO and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) could provide Nigerian journalists with training on security and safety in hostile environments. For instance, the IFJ offers workshops on risk management and security planning for journalists operating in conflict areas (IFJ, 2021).

vii) *Enhancing Public Trust in the Media*

Restoring public trust in the media is essential for the survival of democracy in Nigeria. To achieve this, media organisations must adhere to high standards of professionalism, accuracy and impartiality. Self-regulatory mechanisms, such as ombudsman services or independent media councils, can help hold journalists accountable for their reporting. In this regard, Nigeria could learn from countries like Sweden, where an independent Press Council oversees journalistic ethics and ensures that media outlets are held accountable for disseminating misinformation or biased reports (Press Council of Sweden, 2020).

Engaging in public dialogues and forums where media professionals, civil society and the public can discuss media challenges and solutions would also help rebuild trust. When the media is seen as a transparent and accountable institution, its credibility is strengthened, making it more difficult for fake news and misinformation to take hold.

7. Implications of the Review Study

The findings of this review study on the role of print media in elections in Nigeria carry several critical implications for various stakeholders, including policymakers, media practitioners, political parties and the electorate.

For policymakers, the study highlights the ongoing importance of print media as a tool for voter education and political communication. Despite the rise of digital platforms, print media retains a significant role, particularly in rural areas and among populations with limited access to the internet. Policymakers should therefore consider creating policies that support the sustainability of the print media industry, ensuring that it continues to function as a reliable source of information during elections. Additionally, regulations addressing misinformation and the political manipulation of media must be enforced rigorously, as print media is not immune to these challenges.

Media practitioners in Northern Nigeria can draw valuable lessons from this research about the trust placed in print media by certain demographics. The findings underscore the need for maintaining high ethical standards in journalism to protect the credibility of print outlets, especially during politically sensitive times like elections. Print media organisations may need to rethink their business models and adopt hybrid strategies, blending

traditional and digital platforms to remain relevant and financially sustainable. The challenge of adapting to a digital-first world while preserving the integrity and depth that print journalism offers must be a priority for media houses moving forward.

For political parties and candidates, the study shows that print media remains a vital channel for communicating political messages to the electorate. This suggests that investing in well-researched and factual print advertising campaigns can still yield significant benefits, particularly in reaching older or rural voters. However, parties must recognise the growing demand for transparency and accuracy, as voters increasingly scrutinise the reliability of media sources.

For the electorate, particularly in Northern Nigeria, the study's implications revolve around the continued need for critical media consumption. As elections become more media-saturated, the ability to discern credible information from politically motivated content remains pivotal. The implications for voters are twofold: they need access to reliable print media to make informed decisions, and they must cultivate media literacy skills to navigate both traditional and digital media landscapes effectively.

For theory, the study's exploration of the role of print media in elections within Northern Nigeria offers several significant implications for communication and media theories. These implications advance theoretical understanding in multiple areas:

Media Dependency Theory: This research underscores the relevance of Media Dependency Theory (MDT), which posits that the relationship between audiences and media is influenced by the media's role in providing essential information, especially in contexts where other sources are limited. The study confirms that print media continues to serve as a critical source of electoral information in Northern Nigeria, particularly among populations with restricted access to digital media. This reaffirms MDT's assertion that the media's role in information provision becomes even more important in regions with limited alternative sources of information.

Framing Theory: The findings highlight the role of print media in shaping public perception through the framing of political messages and electoral coverage. The study suggests that print media has significant power in framing election narratives, influencing how candidates and issues are perceived by the electorate. This aligns with Framing Theory, which argues that media outlets shape public understanding by presenting information through particular perspectives and lenses. The research contributes to the theory by demonstrating how print media framing can influence voter attitudes and behaviour, particularly in areas with high media reliance.

Agenda-Setting Theory: The study's insights into the emphasis placed on certain political issues and candidates by print media suggest important implications for Agenda-Setting Theory. This theory posits that media can influence the salience of issues by highlighting some over others. The findings indicate that print media plays a critical role in setting the electoral agenda by prioritising specific issues and candidates, thereby shaping the public's perception of what is important. This reinforces the theory's application in the context of print media's influence on the electoral process.

Public Sphere Theory: The research also has implications for Public Sphere Theory, which argues that the media provides a platform for public discourse and deliberation. The study suggests that while print media serves as a critical platform for political discourse, challenges such as misinformation and limited coverage of diverse candidates affect its role in fostering a fully inclusive public sphere. This highlights the need for a more robust and equitable media environment to support democratic deliberation and engagement.

Digital Media Integration: Finally, the study's examination of the interaction between print and digital media contributes to the theoretical discourse on media convergence. It reveals how traditional print media continues to interact with and adapt to digital platforms, influencing its role in elections. This integration raises theoretical questions about the changing media environment and the implications for traditional media theories in an increasingly digital world.

8. Conclusion

The role of print media in elections in Nigeria has been pivotal in shaping public opinion, fostering political discourse and promoting democratic engagement. Historically, newspapers such as *Daily Trust*, *Vanguard* and *New Nigerian* have provided platforms for critical discussions, influencing not only voter behaviour but also holding political actors accountable. In an era of increasing digitisation, where online platforms and social media dominate the dissemination of information, the continued relevance of print media in the region is both a testament to its adaptability and a reflection of the specific needs of the electorate. The socio-political topography in Nigeria, marked by its complexity and diversity, requires the in-depth analysis and nuanced

reporting that print media offers. However, as this paper has explored, challenges including economic instability, shifting media consumption patterns and political interference persist, threatening the very foundation of traditional journalism in the country.

Despite these obstacles, print media in Nigeria continues to play a pivotal role during elections. Its ability to engage in investigative journalism, offer comprehensive coverage and maintain a high level of credibility makes it indispensable in the democratic process. Unlike the often-ephemeral nature of social media, print journalism offers more sustained and researched narratives, essential for informed decision-making during elections. Yet, the future of print media hinges on its ability to navigate an increasingly digital world, where audiences are rapidly migrating online.

8.1 Recommendations

To ensure the continued relevance and sustainability of print media in Nigeria, media organisations should invest in digital transformation. This includes developing robust online platforms that complement traditional print content, allowing newspapers to reach a broader and younger audience while retaining the in-depth reporting that distinguishes print journalism. Training journalists in digital skills and multimedia reporting would further enhance their ability to produce content that resonates in a hybrid media environment.

Additionally, policy-makers and regulatory bodies should prioritise media independence, ensuring that journalists and media houses are shielded from political pressures and economic challenges. This would foster a more conducive environment for investigative journalism, particularly during elections when unbiased reporting is critical. Civil society organisations could also play a role in supporting media literacy initiatives, educating the public on how to assess the credibility of news sources critically, especially in the digital age.

Finally, the government and private sector should provide financial support through grants or partnerships to media organisations, particularly those operating in economically disadvantaged regions of Nigeria, especially the north. This would help alleviate some of the financial pressures faced by newspapers and ensure that quality journalism is not sacrificed in the pursuit of profitability.

8.2 Limitations

This study, while comprehensive in its exploration of the role of print media in elections in Nigeria, is not without limitations. First, the rapidly changing nature of media consumption means that findings related to the relevance of print media may quickly become outdated, especially given the growing influence of social media platforms. Furthermore, the study primarily focused on established newspapers in Nigeria, potentially overlooking the contributions of smaller, community-based print outlets, which also play significant roles in local electoral processes.

Additionally, access to empirical data on the internal workings of print media houses was limited, due to the reluctance of some organisations to share operational details. This may have constrained the depth of analysis regarding the financial and operational challenges faced by these institutions. Future research could benefit from a more granular focus on smaller-scale print operations and the experiences of journalists within them, as well as data that are more robust on the changing relationship between print and digital media in the country.

In conclusion, the future of print media in Nigeria, particularly during elections, lies in its capacity to evolve while retaining its core values of in-depth reporting and credibility. By embracing digital transformation, maintaining media independence and securing financial stability, print media can continue to play a vital role in fostering democracy and informed political engagement in the region.

8.3 Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of print media in elections in Nigeria, several avenues for further research that could deepen our understanding of the dynamic media environment in the country remain unexplored.

Firstly, future research could examine the intersection between print and digital media during electoral cycles. As more audiences turn to online platforms for news, an analysis of how traditional newspapers are adapting to and integrating with digital technologies would provide critical information on the sustainability of print journalism. This could include investigating the impact of hybrid models, where newspapers utilise both print and digital platforms to engage their readership. Additionally, it would be important to explore how these platforms complement or compete with one another in terms of credibility, reach and influence on voter behaviour.

Secondly, an exploration of regional and community-level newspapers in Northern Nigeria is warranted. Much of the current research tends to focus on the major national publications, potentially neglecting the significant

role played by smaller, local newspapers that often cater to specific ethnic or regional audiences. Such research could reveal how these localised outlets contribute to voter education, particularly in rural areas where access to digital platforms may be limited.

Another promising area for future research is the role of media literacy in shaping voter engagement with print media. As misinformation and disinformation continue to proliferate, studying how media literacy initiatives influence public trust in print media, especially during elections, would provide valuable insights into combating fake news. Research could focus on how media literacy programmes in Northern Nigeria educate voters to discern credible sources of information and how such initiatives could be expanded to strengthen democratic participation further.

Finally, there is a need for longitudinal studies that assess the long-term trends in print media consumption across various electoral cycles. Understanding how generational shifts, socio-political changes and economic factors affect the readership and influence of print media over time would contribute to a more dynamic understanding of its role in Nigeria's democratic process. Such studies could also explore whether print media's influence wanes or strengthens as digital alternatives become more accessible across the region.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

References

Agba, P. C. (2007). Role of mass media in electioneering campaign in a developing context. In I. Nwosu (ed.), *Communication for sustainable human development*. Enugu: African Council for Communication Education.

Amnesty International. (2019). *Nigeria: Closure of AIT and RayPower radio stations is an attack on media freedom*. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/nigeria-closure-of-ait-and-raypower-radio-stations-is-an-attack-on-media-freedom/

Balkin, J. M. (1999). How mass media simulate political transparency. *Journal for Cultural Research*, *3*(4), 393-413.

Baran, S. J. & Davis, D. K. (2012). *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment, future*, 6th edition. New York: Wadsworth Cengage.

BBC Media Action. (2021). Training and Mentoring. https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/where-we-work/africa/nigeria

BBC News. (2018). *How Nigerians use social media for news*. BBC News Africa. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-45680325

CDD. (2019). *Fake news and Nigeria's 2019 elections*. Centre for Democracy and Development (CCD). https://www.cddwestafrica.org/fake-news-and-nigerias-2019-elections/

CEBG. (2020). *Commonwealth Election Broadcasting Guidelines*. Commonwealth Secretariat.

Cherubini, F., & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). The Digital Transition of Local News. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/digital-transition-local-news

CIHRS. (2011). Media and parliamentary elections in Egypt: Evaluation of media performance in the parliamentary elections. *Human Rights Movement*, *26*, 27-34.

CPJ. (2023). *Nigeria: Journalists killed since 1992*. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). https://cpj.org/data/killed/africa/nigeria/

Dubawa. (2021). *Fact-checking in Nigeria*. https://dubawa.org

European Commission. (2018). *Tackling disinformation: Media literacy initiatives*. https://ec.europa.eu/digital-strategy/policies/online-disinformation

Folarin, B. (1998). *Theories of mass communication: An introductory text*. Ibadan: StirlingHorden Publishers Nig. Ltd.

Human Rights Watch. (2021). *Nigeria: Brutal crackdown on #EndSARS protests*. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/20/nigeria-brutal-crackdown-endsars-protests

IFJ. (2021). *Safety and security*. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). https://www.ifj.org/safety.html

IFJ. (2024). Global charter of ethics for journalists. International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists

INEC News. (2018). 'Role of the media in the Nigerian electoral process, by INEC Chairman'. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) News, May 2, 2018. https://www.inecnews.com/

Ineji, P. U., Nkanu, E. A. & Okoi, P. E. (2021). Social responsibility media theory and its implication for media professionalism in Nigeria. *Journal of Media, Communication & Languages*, *6*(1), 242-255.

Iredia T. O. (2007). Information dissemination, voter mobilization and election monitoring in Nigerian electoral process. In M. Ogun (ed.), *Improving the fortunes and destiny of Nigeria through the ballot box*. Abuja: Publication of the Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria.

Johnson, J. & Johnson, W. A. (2019). Explication of theoretical foundation of communication policy. *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review* (OMAN Chapter), *3*(4), 99-108.

Kurfi, M. Y. (2010). The role of mass media in democratic society: An opinion survey in Bayero University, Kano. In O. A. Okwilagwe (ed.), *Encylopaedia of mass media & communication: Historical and theoretical perspectives* (pp. 289-300). Ibadan: Stirling–Horden.

Jones, P. (2022). *Media regulation and democracy*. Oxford University Press.

Kužel, R. (2020). *Monitoring of media coverage of elections: Toolkit for civil society organisations*. Council of Europe.

Kužel, B. (2023). *Principles of media coverage in elections*. Routledge.

McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's mass communication theory*. New Delhi: Vistaar Publications.

NBC. (2020). *Fines imposed on TV stations over #EndSARS protest coverage*. https://nbc.gov.ng

Norris, P. (1997). *Electoral change since 1945*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing Limited.

Obagwu, P. U. & Idris, K. M. (2019). Social responsibility theory of the press: A critique of its application and constraints. *International Journal of Innovative Research & Development*, *8*(12), 26-35. https://doi.org/10.24940/ijird/2019/v8/i12/DEC19010

Oboh, G. E. (2016). Reflecting on the Nigerian media, elections, and the African democracy. *Sage Open*, *6*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244016666886

RSF. (2023). *2023 world press freedom index*. Reporters Without Borders (RSF). https://rsf.org/en/index

Smith, R. (2023). *Censorship and freedom of speech*. Cambridge University Press.

Swigger, N. (2012). What you see is what you get: Drawing inferences from campaign imagery. *Political Communication*, *29*, 367-386.

UNDP. (2023). *Electoral integrity and media relations*. United Nations Development Programme.

UNESCO. (2005). *Dakar Declaration on Press Freedom*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

UNHRC (2022). *International covenant on civil and political rights*. United Nations Human Rights Committee.

Authors' Biodata

Mainasara Yakubu Kurfi is a Professor at the Department of Mass Communication, Bayero University, Kano (BUK), Kano State, Nigeria. In addition, he is the current head of the department.

Adamkolo Mohammed Ibrahim is a PhD Research Scholar at the Department of Mass Communication, Bayero University, Kano and Lecturer at the Department of Mass Communication, University of Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria.

Abubakar Tijjani Ibrahim is a PhD Research Scholar at the Department of Mass Communication, Bayero University, Kano and a Lecturer at the Department of Mass Communication, Kano State Polytechnic, Kano, Nigeria.