ISSN 2736-0091
E-ISSN 2737-0107

GOVERNMENT MEDIA RELATIONS AND THE CRISIS OF TRANSPARENCY IN NIGERIA: BETWEEN WATCHDOG JOURNALISM AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

BY

Yahaya, Abdullateeef Bolaji: Department of Mass Communication, Kwara State College of Arabic and Islamic Legal Studies, Ilorin, Nigeria; E-mail: yahayaabdullateefbolaji@gmail.com

Abstract

The pervasive crisis of transparency in Nigeria continues to pose significant threats to democratic accountability, especially in the context of adversarial government–media relations. This study interrogates the intricate dynamics between government agencies and media institutions in Nigeria, with specific attention to how these interactions either facilitate or hinder transparency. Against the backdrop of persistent corruption, politicized information control, and shrinking civic space, the study set out to examine the nature of media–government relations, assess their implications for transparency, identify barriers to media oversight in governance, and propose viable strategies for reform. The research adopted a qualitative design anchored in thematic content analysis. Secondary data were sourced from peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, legal texts (e.g., FOI Act, Cybercrime Act), media investigations, and reports from civil society and transparency watchdogs. Data were drawn from repositories such as AJOL, JSTOR, and official institutional portals. The analysis focused on recurring themes and institutional patterns, with special attention to legal frameworks, communication strategies, and media practices. Findings revealed that media–government relations in Nigeria are largely adversarial, with journalists facing intimidation, censorship, and legal repression. The FOI Act remains poorly enforced, while investigative journalism, though impactful, is limited to isolated cases. Political interference, patronage, and infrastructural constraints continue to suppress press freedom and undermine transparency. The study concludes that without legal reforms, ownership restructuring, and institutional safeguards, the media cannot fulfill its watchdog role. Key recommendations include enforcing FOI compliance, funding independent journalism, and fostering inclusive dialogue among stakeholders.

Keywords: Transparency, Media freedom, Government relations, Accountability and Investigative journalism

Introduction

The issue of governance in Nigeria continues to suffer from pervasive corruption and lack of transparency, even with attempts at institutional design changes and organizational restructuring (Ladi et al., 2025). Scholars point out that while legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act (2011) was meant to promote openness, enforcement is too weak due to systemic sabotage like the application of the Official Secrets Act by government departments to hide information (Policy Analysis, 2025). In contemporary society, media channels alongside social and traditional platforms have become crucial stakeholders in fighting corruption and demanding accountability (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025). Nevertheless, persistent infrastructural deficiencies unreliable power combined with low digital literacy limit journalists' ability to take full advantage of these platforms (Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025). Adeyemi et al. (2024) pointed out that while public relations efforts from government institutions may aid in fostering transparency, many strategies are lacking depth and therefore do not achieve the intended goals. As a result, the hopeful notion of the media acting as a democratic "Fourth Estate" is crippled by political control, regulatory restraint, moral dilemmas such "brown envelope" antics that tarnish media reputation in Nigeria (Inobemhe et al., 2025).

As pointed out by Inobemhe et al. (2025), the nature of government media interactions in Nigeria is mostly conflictual, characterized by public relations efforts designed to conceal rather than genuinely reveal actions taken by the government. While strategic communication can enhance transparency, access to information within most government institutions is limited to infrequent press conferences devoid of meaningful substance (Inobemhe et al., 2025). Empirical research shows there are systemic barriers undermining FOI applications, with journalists largely reporting denial or neglect regarding their requests for information, which creates a disincentive for covering stories in the public interest (Ahmed & Idi, 2025). Adding to this are documented cases of politically affiliated owners of media enterprises interfering with the editorial decisions of their journalists that lead to self censorship concerning reportage on corruption (Inobemhe et al., 2025). As a result, the Nigerian transparency ecology remains

ISSN 2736-0091
E-ISSN 2737-0107

fragile and dominated by refracted narratives partially hidden due to lack of reliable information which severely hampers institutional accountability (Ogbuvbu, 2021).

Fueling the discussion more intensely are legal tools such as the Cybercrime Act that is often used to curb investigative journalism in the name of protecting cybersecurity (AP News, 2024). Since it came into law and after several amendments, many journalists have been arrested or prosecuted without charges being filed which reflects how anti-corruption journalism is treated as a criminal offense (Ahmed & Idi, 2025). The frequent and opaque nature of such prosecutions contributes to the erosion of press freedom and public trust. High profile cases like the arrest of Foundation for Investigative Journalism reporters serve as examples (AP News, 2024). Scholars argue that media institutions are increasingly under pressure due to the continuing use of this Act and a divide deepens between unfulfilled legal assurances of transparency other than those imposed by reality and lived experience governed practices (Ahmed & Idi, 2025). This situation is made worse by institutional gaps within anti-corruption frameworks whose attempts to recover large sums have gained some success but operate within a system where impunity is still tolerated (Reuters, 2025).

Discretionary state policy caters to selective transparency and civic engagement, enabling the manipulation of information to stifle advanced media systems (Ezeajughu, 2024). Legal frameworks such as the Cybercrime Act serve as a pretext for arrests while security agencies resort to extralegal harassment, which results in an investigative reporting freeze and severely hampers coverage on corruption issues (AP News, 2024). A cross-regional empirical survey conducted in Taraba and areas within the South South zone indicates a considerable portion of journalists do not have adequate knowledge of Freedom of Information provisions or the skills needed to utilize them in proving cases of administrative negligence (Ahmed & Idi, 2024; Guanah & Bebenimibo, 2025). In addition to this exacerbating issue are internal weaknesses within the media, such as low budgets that make them vulnerable to ethical capture through bribes which diminish their watchdog potency (Adeyemi et al., 2024; Wikipedia, 2025). Therefore, although norms and laws along with recent innovations in digital media would appear to advocate for transparency, an intricate web of political manipulation coupled with infrastructural limitations and ethical concerns undermines any attempts at genuine government–media collaboration aimed toward constructive transparency and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the nature of government media relations in Nigeria.
2. To assess how government media interactions affect transparency and public accountability.
3. To identify barriers to effective media oversight in governance processes.
4. To propose strategies for improving transparency through better government media engagement.

Literature Review

Governance typically refers to the formal and informal institutions that shape public authority and development outcomes in Nigeria (Oche & Hassan, 2021). Transparency involves openness in decision making and accessibility of information to stakeholders (Soludo & Nwankwo, 2022). Effective governance and transparency are deeply entwined; when one falters, the other suffers (Nwodo & Umeh, 2023). Transparency is also recognized as a vital anti corruption instrument since it exposes irregularities in public administration (Ezeajughu, 2024). Scholars emphasize that without transparency, governance remains susceptible to mismanagement and elite capture (Okoye & Ogbonna, 2020). Media freedom in Nigeria is often conceptualized as the autonomy of press institutions to operate without coercion or manipulation (Okoye & Ogbonna, 2020). This includes freedom from political interference as well as financial independence (Abubakar & Musa, 2022). Corruption is seen both as an outcome of poor governance and as an entrenched culture within institutions (Ezeajughu, 2024). When media lack independence due to ownership, advertising dependencies or state influence they fail to hold power to account (Soludo & Nwankwo, 2022). Scholars stress that unchecked corruption undermines transparency and weakens public confidence in both media and government (Nwodo & Umeh, 2023).

The relation between media and government in democratic theory is normative: media should act as a watchdog over public power (Ogundele & Akande, 2019). In practice, Nigerian media–government relations are distorted by patronage, political alignment of owners, and selective press access (Adegboye & Okeke, 2023). While some

ISSN 2736-0091
E-ISSN 2737-0107

outlets resist, many collaborate with state actors reporting what political elites want publicized (Chukwuemeka & Nnadi, 2020). This places media in a paradox: they are agents of public scrutiny, yet often positioned as mouthpieces (Okafor & Usman, 2021). Literature suggests that genuine transparency requires media autonomy and state willingness to engage critically (Ezeajughu, 2024). The Social Responsibility Theory argues the media must act in the public interest balancing freedom with ethical responsibility (Ogundele & Akande, 2019). Nigerian scholars point out that commercial pressures often skew media coverage away from civic goods toward sensationalist stories (Okafor & Usman, 2021). When media are publicly responsible, they serve as platforms for marginalized voices and hold power accountable (Abubakar & Musa, 2022). However, weak regulation and little oversight means these ideals are rarely met in practice (Ezeajughu, 2024). Analysts contend that regulatory frameworks should promote transparency without enabling censorship (Okoye & Ogbonna, 2020).

Agenda Setting Theory suggests that media may not tell people what to think, but they influence what people think about (Chukwuemeka & Nnadi, 2020). Nigerian scholarship shows that political operators deploy media to push certain narratives often downplaying corruption or emphasizing state propaganda (Adegboye & Okeke, 2023). Where journalism is independent and investigative, it can redirect public discourse toward hidden governance failures (Chukwuemeka & Nnadi, 2020). The practice is uneven however, due to constraints such as ownership and advertising dependencies (Abubakar & Musa, 2022). Thus, transparency efforts depend on who controls the media agenda (Soludo & Nwankwo, 2022). Habermas's Public Sphere Theory proposes that democratic governance relies on spaces for rational critical public debate (Habermas, 1964/2021). In Nigeria, media environments are far from such ideals due to clientelism, restricted access, and economic inequality (Nwodo & Umeh, 2023). Some independent platforms foster inclusive debate especially on anti corruption but such spaces are exceptions (Okoye & Ogbonna, 2020). When governments dominate media narratives, they limit the public sphere and stifle civic transparency (Ezeajughu, 2024). For meaningful public discourse, scholars urge support for independent media and regulatory freedom (Soludo & Nwankwo, 2022).

Several Nigerian studies have examined the role of media in the anti corruption struggle, highlighting both its contributions and limitations. For instance, Chukwuemeka and Nnadi (2020) conducted a content analysis of five investigative news outlets and found that media exposure of graft, particularly in the health and education sectors, significantly influenced public perception and pressured anti corruption agencies into action. Their findings revealed that although investigative reporting sparked public debates, it rarely led to prosecutions, suggesting a gap between exposure and enforcement. Similarly, Ogundele and Akande (2019) assessed the extent of media involvement in transparency enforcement through semi structured interviews with media professionals across Lagos and Abuja. The study revealed that journalists often face intimidation, censorship, and resource constraints, making consistent anti-corruption reporting difficult. Okafor and Usman (2021) employed FOI request tracking as a method and discovered that government agencies deliberately ignored or delayed responses, thus undermining the FOI Act. Their research further noted that only a handful of media organizations followed up on non responses, indicating weak institutional support. Ezeajughu (2024), using a mixed methods design, evaluated the performance of public broadcasting agencies and found a deep entrenchment of self-censorship and reluctance to report on government misconduct due to ownership ties. These studies converge on the conclusion that while the Nigerian media plays a vital role in exposing corruption, structural challenges continue to hinder its full potential in enhancing transparency and accountability.

In addition to domestic studies, comparative insights from other African democracies offer valuable benchmarks. Soludo and Nwankwo (2022), in a comparative case study of Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa, found that while South African media benefitted from legal protection and institutional independence, Nigerian journalists lacked security of tenure and legal safeguards. The researchers showed that in Ghana, access to public information was more institutionalized, resulting in stronger media–civil society collaboration than in Nigeria. Abubakar and Musa (2022) documented a case study of the 2022 confrontation between northern Nigerian journalists and state government agencies over access to budgetary records. Using legal document analysis and interviews, the authors concluded that even with the FOI Act in place, journalists were often treated as adversaries and subjected to digital surveillance and police harassment. Adegboye and Okeke (2023) also examined this tension through ethnographic observations in state owned media houses and found that editorial policies were dictated by political appointees, thus eroding journalistic independence.

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E-ISSN 2737-0107

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design that utilized secondary data sources to critically examine the interplay between government–media relations and transparency in Nigeria. The choice of a qualitative approach was rooted in the need to conduct an in-depth analysis of documented patterns, institutional behaviors, and discourse surrounding access to information, public accountability, and media freedom. Data were collected from a wide array of credible and legitimate sources, including peer reviewed journal articles, official government publications, policy documents, and legislative texts such as the Freedom of Information Act and the Cybercrime Act. Additional sources included investigative reports published by reputable journalism outlets (e.g., Premium Times, Sahara Reporters), and transparency watchdog organizations such as BudgIT, Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), and the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP). The data were retrieved from academic repositories like ResearchGate, African Journals Online (AJOL), JSTOR, and verified institutional websites. The study adopted thematic content analysis as its analytical framework. Texts were systematically coded to identify recurring themes, dominant narratives, and underlying contradictions within the media government transparency nexus. Specific focus was placed on how official communication strategies, legal frameworks, and journalistic practices intersected to either enable or restrict transparency. The analysis also accounted for contextual nuances, including political influence on media structures and institutional reluctance to disclose information. This methodological approach allowed the researcher to synthesize diverse perspectives and generate a grounded interpretation of the challenges and prospects embedded in Nigeria's pursuit of transparent governance.

Results

1. Despite the existence of frameworks like the Freedom of Information Act, transparency in Nigeria largely exists as a rhetorical aspiration, with state institutions routinely circumventing openness through bureaucratic bottlenecks, delayed responses, and deliberate non disclosure.
2. The capacity of Nigerian media to hold government actors accountable is significantly compromised by systemic issues such as ownership interference, brown envelope journalism, and advertising dependency on state actors.
3. Rather than a collaborative or complementary relationship that fosters mutual accountability, the government media interface in Nigeria is often adversarial. Journalists are harassed, surveilled, detained, and prosecuted under ambiguous laws such as the Cybercrime Act, turning media actors into targets of state repression instead of partners in governance.
4. Digital and alternative media have expanded the symbolic boundaries of Nigeria's public sphere, offering new spaces for civic engagement and anti corruption discourse.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study illuminate the complex and often contradictory nature of government–media relations in Nigeria, particularly in the context of promoting transparency and accountable governance. The first research objective sought to examine the nature of media–government interaction in Nigeria, and the findings confirm that this relationship is neither linear nor benign. Instead, it is characterized by cyclical antagonism, subtle co optation, and periods of outright suppression. Although normative democratic theory emphasizes the media's role as a watchdog and fourth estate, the empirical reality in Nigeria reveals a political culture that tolerates press freedom only when it aligns with state interests (Inobemhe et al., 2025). This dynamic is evident in the selective enforcement of laws, like the Cybercrime Act, which are often weaponized to target dissenting journalists and news platforms that probe too deeply into the affairs of powerful public officials. The state's aversion to scrutiny and its sensitivity to criticism result in a fraught media space, where transparency is negotiated rather than constitutionally guaranteed.

The second objective was to assess the extent to which media institutions in Nigeria serve as instruments of transparency. While the literature and data analyzed reveal instances of impactful investigative journalism particularly by digital outlets such as Premium Times, Sahara Reporters, and Dataphyte these are exceptions rather than the norm. The broader media landscape is largely enmeshed in clientelist networks that dilute journalistic autonomy and suppress critical reporting. This is compounded by structural dependencies on state patronage, with many media houses relying heavily on government advertising revenues and political affiliations to stay afloat.

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E-ISSN 2737-0107

Consequently, news agendas are often framed not by public interest or civic urgency but by the imperatives of political economy and regime survival. According to Okafor & Usman (2021) the watchdog role of the press is thus systematically weakened, especially in regions where political elites maintain direct influence over media ownership and editorial boards. As a result, the promise of the media as a tool for promoting transparency remains largely unfulfilled, operating within a confined space of negotiated autonomy (Ogundele & Akande, 2019).

Moreover, the third objective of this study was to identify the barriers confronting media institutions in accessing public information. These barriers manifest both institutionally and ideologically. Despite the passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in 2011, state institutions have developed a range of evasive tactics to obstruct access. These include procedural delays, opaque bureaucracies, selective disclosure, and outright denial of requests. The lack of enforcement mechanisms or judicial reprisal for violating FOI obligations further emboldens non compliance. This aligns with findings by Okafor and Usman (2021) and Abubakar and Musa (2022), who document cases where government officials either ignored journalists' FOI requests or responded with misleading information. The symbolic existence of the FOI Act, rather than its operationalization, underscores the performative nature of transparency in Nigeria's governance landscape. Journalists who persist in pursuing sensitive information often face intimidation, smear campaigns, or legal threats, thereby reinforcing a culture of silence and fear that is antithetical to democratic accountability.

Findings for the fourth objective show that improving transparency in Nigeria requires strengthening both legal frameworks and media independence. Evidence indicates persistent state resistance to openness, as journalists face intimidation and legal repression under laws like the Cybercrime Act (AP News, 2024; Ahmed & Idi, 2025). Studies also confirm widespread non-compliance with the FOI Act, with agencies routinely denying or delaying information requests (Okafor & Usman, 2021; Abubakar & Musa, 2022). These findings support strategies such as enforcing FOI obligations, reforming repressive laws, and protecting journalists. The literature further shows that political interference and ownership control undermine editorial autonomy, weakening the media's watchdog role (Ezeajughu, 2024; Adegboye & Okeke, 2023). Internal challenges like brown-envelope practices and financial constraints also limit transparency efforts (Adeyemi et al., 2025). Thus, proposed strategies must address both government obstruction and internal media vulnerabilities to meaningfully enhance transparency.

Conclusion

This study has rigorously explored the nexus between government–media relations and transparency in Nigeria, revealing a landscape fraught with contradictions, institutional constraints, and political entanglements. While democratic theory situates the media as a pillar of accountability and a watchdog of public interest, Nigeria's practical realities expose a media terrain that is heavily compromised by systemic patronage, coercive legal instruments, and economic dependencies. The interaction between government and the media oscillates between fragile cooperation and institutional hostility, thereby undermining the media's role in promoting transparency. Despite the constitutional guarantees of press freedom and the legislative presence of the Freedom of Information Act, access to information remains arbitrarily restricted, with public institutions routinely evading scrutiny. Investigative journalism—though vibrant in select digital spaces—faces existential threats from censorship, legal repression, and editorial interference, particularly in mainstream outlets. Furthermore, theoretical frameworks that advocate for a socially responsible, agenda shaping, and deliberative press are consistently betrayed by the operational deficiencies of the Nigerian media system. In sum, the promise of the media as a vanguard of transparency remains stifled by structural fragility, political antagonism, and normative incoherence.

Recommendations

1. Legislative amendments should be made to introduce punitive measures for public institutions that ignore or delay FOI requests. Additionally, civil society coalitions should establish public dashboards that track FOI compliance in real time to name and shame defaulters.
2. The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission and other regulatory bodies must mandate transparency in media ownership and prohibit active politicians from owning or controlling media houses. Independent ownership should be incentivized through tax reliefs and funding opportunities to reduce economic capture.

ISSN 2736-0091
E-ISSN 2737-0107

3. Ambiguous legislation such as the Cybercrime Act, Official Secrets Act, and Sedition Laws must be revisited and amended to align with international standards on press freedom. Legal reforms should be complemented by judicial training on the rights of journalists under a democratic framework.
4. Journalism associations and press unions should prioritize training in data journalism, FOI procedures, encryption, and legal protections. These trainings must be regionally inclusive to empower media practitioners beyond urban centers.

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