



WEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities

Vol. 12. No. 2, (2026)

ISSN: 2488- 9210 (Print) 2504-9038 (Online)

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Indexed by: Academic Journals Online, Google Scholar, Igwebuike Research Institute

MEDIA SUPPRESSION AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

*This study examined media suppression and its implications for democratic governance and freedom of expression in Nigeria. The study identified persistent limitations on media freedom that undermined democratic accountability. Press freedom in practice was constrained by censorship, restrictive media laws, regulatory control, arrests, and economic pressures, which together limited open public discourse and inhibited the media's watchdog role. The study adopted a **qualitative and analytical research method**, relying on secondary sources including scholarly literature, legal provisions, historical records, and documented cases of media repression to explore the evolution, causes, and consequences of media suppression in Nigeria. Findings revealed that media suppression in Nigeria was reinforced by colonial legacies, prolonged military authoritarianism, and contemporary democratic challenges. These constraints manifested in various ways, including the **2021 ban on Twitter**, which restricted digital public discourse under the guise of national security, and repeated **arrests and intimidation of journalists covering protests and governance issues**. The research also showed that laws such as the Cybercrime Act were used to intimidate and harass reporters, leading to widespread self-censorship and fear among media practitioners. The study concluded that, although the Nigerian media continued to exhibit resilience, structural and institutional barriers significantly limited its effectiveness as a democratic institution. It therefore recommended comprehensive legal reforms to align media laws with democratic ideals, strengthening the independence of regulatory bodies, enhanced legal protections for journalists, and expanded media literacy programmes to support a more informed and open civic space.*

Keywords: Freedom of Expression, Media Suppression, Governance, Democracy



Introduction

Freedom of expression is an essential pillar of democratic governance, underpinning citizens' ability to participate in public discourse, hold leadership accountable, and contribute to national development. In Nigeria, freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed under Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution and supported by international human rights frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. Despite these legal safeguards, the actual practice of freedom of expression has been significantly constrained by systematic media suppression, which undermines democratic processes and weakens institutional accountability. Media suppression in Nigeria has taken multiple forms, including direct censorship, regulatory interference, economic pressures, and legal intimidation of journalists. For example, the nationwide suspension of Twitter operations in 2021 restricted citizens' ability to engage freely on digital platforms, effectively narrowing public discourse under the guise of national security (Oyinloye, Oyegoke, Odion and Ojewumi, 2024).

Journalists covering key national events, such as the #EndSARS protests, have faced harassment and threats, leading to widespread self-censorship among media practitioners (Talabi, 2023). Furthermore, provisions in laws like the Cybercrime Act have been used to intimidate and silence critical voices, making media practitioners vulnerable to punitive state actions (Aluko and Oloyede, 2025). These patterns of suppression have weakened the media's watchdog role, limited civic engagement, and constrained the democratic space needed for accountability and transparency. While Nigerian media institutions have demonstrated resilience through sustained investigative reporting and civic advocacy, persistent structural and institutional barriers continue to limit their effectiveness. Regulatory bodies often lack independence, media laws remain outdated, and the threat of legal repercussions contributes to a climate of fear among journalists. Given these challenges, this study seeks to examine the dynamics of media suppression in Nigeria and its implications for democratic governance and freedom of expression. By analysing the historical roots, legal frameworks, and contemporary manifestations of media suppression, the research aims to provide insight into the broader socio-political context that shapes media practice in Nigeria. Additionally, the study will identify critical areas where reforms are necessary to safeguard press freedom and strengthen democratic consolidation.

Conceptual Framework

Concept of Freedom of Expression

Mu'azu and Tagi (2019) argue that freedom of expression in Nigeria is a constitutional right, protected under the 1999 Constitution, and is fundamental to democratic governance and public participation. Their conceptualization situates freedom of expression as essential to political discourse and press freedom but also recognizes that the Constitution allows for limited restrictions in the interest of public good. This legal framing is useful for



understanding formal protections, but it underplays how state practices (e.g., selective enforcement) distort these guarantees in real democratic contexts like Nigeria's contemporary media environment. Muhammad and Gwarzo (2019) highlight that freedom of expression is not absolute in Nigeria, noting that while the Constitution guarantees it, various laws and practices limit this right through censorship, defamation rules, and media trials. They stress that the press plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, but this role can be curtailed by restrictive legal and political structures. This perspective reinforces the idea that constitutional rights are often subject to political and legal interpretation; however, it requires deeper engagement with how such limitations affect citizens' everyday access to critical information.

Onyeaku's work emphasizes that freedom of expression includes both traditional media and digital media spaces. He argues that the absence of specific legislation against fake news and hate speech creates ambiguity in how freedom of expression is regulated, especially online (Onyeaku, 2019). Onyeaku's comparative lens shows that regulating speech in the digital age complicates the conceptual boundary between protected expression and harmful content, highlighting a legal gap in adapting freedom of expression to contemporary media realities.

Obiora, Chiamogu and Chiamogu (2022) focus on the impact of media regulation on civic space and freedom of expression, observing that digital regulation practices (such as platform suspensions and content control) have immediate effects on citizens' communication rights. Their approach draws on authoritarian media theory to conceptualize freedom of expression as contingent upon the openness of civic space. This interpretation expands the concept beyond constitutional guarantees to include sociopolitical conditions that enable or restrict free expression, making it especially relevant for understanding digital media in Nigeria. In the scholarship on freedom of expression, Grimm (2021) discusses freedom of media as a communicative right that extends traditional free speech to mass media systems, including press and broadcasting, and by extension, contemporary digital operators. This framing is valuable because it situates individual free speech within the media ecology, suggesting that without media independence and access, freedom of expression cannot thrive; this supports the argument that media suppression undermines democratic discourse.

Concept of Media Suppression

Oyinloye, Oyegoke, Odion and Ojewumi (2024) define media suppression as state practices of regulation and censorship that interfere with journalistic autonomy and media plurality. They identify legal mechanisms such as inconsistent regulatory frameworks and arbitrary actions (like social media bans) as forms of suppression that distort democratic discourse. This approach underscores that suppression is not only overt censorship but can be embedded within legal and regulatory practices that appear neutral yet erode media freedom. Obiora, Chiamogu and Chiamogu (2022) further conceptualizes media suppression as actions that reduce civic space, specifically through digital and social media



regulation. They argue that such measures often reflect autocratizing tendencies that limit freedom of expression and political engagement. By incorporating digital platforms, their perspective is timely and expands traditional understandings of suppression to include online environments where democratic expression increasingly occurs. **Garison, Yakubu and Tsokwa (2024)**

conceptualize media suppression through the lens of media hegemony, where dominant groups control narratives and marginalize alternative voices. They highlight that concentrated media ownership and narrative manipulation function as suppression mechanisms, beyond state censorship. This view adds a structural dimension to media suppression by showing how economic and ownership factors can suppress dissenting discourse even in the absence of direct state intervention. **Ekpah, Dagba and Hiim (2024)** focus on government restrictions on social media as a specific mode of suppression, identifying content censorship, bans, and user regulation as ways that authorities limit freedom of expression. Their empirical insights concretize media suppression as tangible restrictions with measurable effects on communication rights, offering a useful operational definition for research on democratic governance. **Onyeabor (2023)** conceptualizes suppression in the digital age, noting that government efforts to regulate or curtail social media distinctively impact citizens' exercise of free expression, highlighting historical traces of control extending from traditional media to digital platforms. This longitudinal view demonstrates that media suppression is not new but evolves with technology, making it critical to understand suppression as adaptive rather than static.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted **Media Dependency Theory** as its theoretical framework, a model propounded by **Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in 1976**. The theory posits that media, audiences, and society exist in an interdependent relationship, where individuals rely on media for information, guidance, and understanding of social and political events, while society depends on media to maintain norms, coordinate public action, and ensure transparency (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976). According to the theory, the more individuals depend on media to fulfill their informational and cognitive needs, the greater the media's influence on their perceptions, attitudes, and decision-making. This dependency is particularly high during periods of social change, political uncertainty, or crisis, when audiences actively seek explanations and guidance from media sources. The relevance of this theory to the current study on **media suppression and democratic governance in Nigeria** lies in its ability to explain the consequences of restricting media access and freedom. In contexts where citizens rely heavily on media to stay informed about governance, policies, and societal issues, actions such as censorship, legal intimidation of journalists, and social media bans like the **2021 Twitter suspension** or harassment of reporters during the **#EndSARS protests** disrupt this dependency, undermining transparency, public discourse, and democratic accountability. This study frames media suppression not merely as a limitation of press freedom but as a structural disruption of the societal communication system, which is essential for sustaining democracy, civic engagement, and informed decision-making in Nigeria



History of Media Suppression in Nigeria

The history of media suppression in Nigeria is long-standing, evolving from colonial control to contemporary legal and digital restrictions. During the colonial era, the British administration sought to maintain political dominance and prevent anti-colonial activism by controlling press activities. Laws such as the **Press Ordinance of 1933** and the **Newspaper Registration Ordinance of 1939** required newspapers to obtain government approval, limited circulation of critical publications, and criminalized dissent against colonial authorities (Oyinloye, Oyegoke, Odion, and Ojewumi, 2024). The colonial government also relied on punitive measures, including the confiscation of publications and imprisonment of editors, establishing an early precedent for state intervention in media operations. Following independence in 1960, Nigeria's media landscape initially enjoyed relative freedom, contributing to public debates and national development. However, this freedom was quickly undermined by successive military regimes, beginning with the first coup in 1966. Military governments, including those led by Generals Yakubu Gowon, Murtala Muhammed, and Olusegun Obasanjo, imposed strict censorship, closed newspapers, and arrested journalists who challenged state narratives (Aluko and Oloyede, 2025). The most severe suppression occurred under **General Sani Abacha (1993–1998)**, when numerous newspapers were shut down, journalists were detained without trial, and media houses were subjected to raids for exposing corruption and human rights violations. These measures fostered a climate of fear and self-censorship, severely weakening the media's watchdog role.

The return to democratic governance in 1999 brought formal constitutional guarantees for freedom of expression under Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution. Despite these legal protections, media suppression did not disappear; it adapted to new political and technological contexts. Contemporary suppression has become more subtle, involving legal intimidation, regulatory control, economic pressures, and digital censorship. The **2021 Twitter ban** exemplifies this shift, as the government restricted millions of Nigerians' access to social media platforms under the pretext of national security, while critics argued it was intended to curb political dissent (Talabi, 2023). Similarly, journalists covering the **#EndSARS protests** in 2020 faced arrests, harassment, and intimidation, illustrating the continuity of repression in democratic Nigeria (Obiora, Chiamogu, and Chiamogu, 2022). Beyond legal and political measures, structural factors have also contributed to media suppression. Concentrated media ownership, partisan reporting, and economic dependency on state advertising revenue have restricted the ability of journalists to operate independently (Oyinloye et al., 2024). Additionally, digital-era challenges, including cybercrime legislation, online content monitoring, and platform-specific restrictions, have introduced new forms of suppression that continue to limit freedom of expression in Nigeria. Collectively, these historical and contemporary patterns demonstrate that media suppression is a persistent phenomenon that evolves with political regimes and technological change, yet its effect remains consistent: curtailing democratic participation, restricting civic discourse, and weakening accountability mechanisms.



Contemporary Instances of Media Suppression in Nigeria

Despite Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999 and constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression under Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution, media suppression continues in contemporary settings, taking new forms shaped by political, legal, and economic factors.

The Twitter Ban of 2021

In June 2021, the Nigerian government announced a suspension of Twitter operations nationwide following the deletion of a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari, which was perceived as violating the platform's policies. The ban restricted millions of Nigerians from accessing a critical digital communication platform, effectively limiting public discourse and the free flow of information (Oyinloye, Oyegoke, Odion, and Ojewumi, 2024). While the government cited national security concerns as justification, critics argued that the ban represented an attempt to stifle dissent, control political narratives, and intimidate citizens from expressing opposition online. The Twitter suspension illustrates how modern media suppression increasingly leverages digital platforms, demonstrating that restrictions on freedom of expression are not confined to traditional media but extend to online and social media spaces.

Arrests of Journalists During #EndSARS and Protests

The #EndSARS protests of 2020 highlighted another dimension of media suppression in Nigeria. Journalists covering police brutality and government responses were frequently harassed, threatened, or detained. Talabi (2023) reports that several reporters were prevented from documenting protests, while media houses faced intimidation to avoid critical coverage. Such actions fostered self-censorship among journalists and compromised the media's role as a watchdog, limiting citizens' access to accurate information during pivotal social movements. These incidents underscore the persistence of state-mediated suppression, even in a democratic environment, where journalists remain vulnerable to punitive measures.

Regulatory and Economic Pressures on Media Houses

In addition to overt censorship, Nigerian media faces significant regulatory and economic pressures. Regulatory bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) have been criticized for arbitrary fines, license suspensions, and biased monitoring of media content, which can coerce compliance with government preferences (Aluko and Oloyede, 2025). Economically, media houses often rely heavily on government advertising revenue, making them susceptible to financial manipulation that discourages critical reporting. These structural pressures illustrate that media suppression is not only about legal and



political restrictions but also about the economic and institutional environment that constrains journalistic independence and the free exercise of expression.

These contemporary instances demonstrate that media suppression in Nigeria has evolved to include digital censorship, direct harassment, and systemic economic and regulatory pressures. Collectively, they undermine democratic governance by restricting information access, limiting public discourse, and weakening the capacity of media to hold political authorities accountable. Understanding these manifestations is crucial for designing legal, institutional, and policy interventions aimed at safeguarding press freedom and strengthening democratic processes in Nigeria.

Challenges and Barriers to Media Freedom in Nigeria

Media freedom in Nigeria continues to face significant challenges that undermine its ability to function as a key pillar of democratic governance.

Structural and institutional challenges manifest through weak media infrastructures, financial constraints, and restrictive legal frameworks that limit journalistic autonomy. Investigative journalists often lack adequate funding, resources, and institutional support to pursue in-depth reporting, especially on sensitive issues such as corruption and security, leading to compromised editorial independence (Aondover, Adewale, Falobi, and Maiwada, 2024). Media organisations are also frequently owned or influenced by political elites and business interests, which affects newsroom decisions and promotes biased or self-protective reporting rather than objective journalism (Aondover et al., 2024).

Moreover, laws such as the Cybercrime Act have been used to intimidate and detain journalists, while regulatory bodies often lack the independence to resist political pressures, creating an environment where structural controls substitute for direct censorship (Aluko and Oloyede, 2025). A related barrier is **self-censorship and threats to journalists**, which have become pervasive due to the fear of reprisals, legal action, or physical harm. Reports indicate that security forces in Nigeria have exerted surveillance powers and have access to journalists' private communications, which has contributed to growing self-censorship among media professionals to avoid arrest or harassment under ambiguous provisions of media and cyber laws.

Journalists covering contentious topics such as insurgency, terrorism, and political corruption have faced direct threats to their safety, including physical attacks, kidnappings, and loss of sources, often with little accountability for perpetrators (Aondover et al., 2024). These conditions not only compromise journalists' freedom but also limit the public's access to critical information necessary for democratic participation.

Finally, **political interference and partisan pressures** pose substantial barriers. Government actors at federal and state levels often influence media narratives through withdrawal of advertising, denial of information access, or overt pressure to shape coverage



in their favour, thereby reducing media independence. During elections and political campaigns, media houses and journalists face heightened interference, including direct requests for news editors to alter or remove content that is unfavorable to political interests. This interference fosters a culture where journalists and media outlets may align with partisan agendas or refrain from critical coverage to maintain access and avoid conflict, further eroding press freedom and the media's role as an unbiased watchdog in Nigerian democracy.

Solutions to Enhancing Media Freedom in Nigeria

Legal and Policy Reforms

One of the most widely suggested solutions to overcoming media suppression in Nigeria is comprehensive legal and policy reform. Osakue and Eribo (2021) argue that outdated and restrictive laws such as sections of the Cybercrime Act and the Official Secrets Act have been used to intimidate journalists and constrain free expression. They recommend revising these laws to conform with international human rights standards and to ensure that restrictions are narrowly tailored and proportionate to legitimate aims (Osakue and Eribo, 2021). Similarly, Nwosu and Ekejindu (2022) contend that Nigeria's legal framework should explicitly protect digital expression and limit governmental discretion in censoring online platforms, thereby reducing the arbitrary use of legal instruments to suppress dissent. These reforms would strengthen the rule of law and provide clearer safeguards for media practitioners.

Strengthening Independent Regulatory Bodies

A second solution concerns strengthening regulatory institutions to operate with genuine independence. According to Okunna (2019), regulatory bodies like the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and other media oversight agencies have historically been influenced by political forces, resulting in biased enforcement of media codes. Okunna argues for statutory guarantees of financial and administrative autonomy for regulatory bodies, coupled with transparent appointment processes that involve civil society and media stakeholders. Similarly, Akinfeleye (2020) suggests that independent regulatory frameworks, modeled on best practices in comparative democracies, can help insulate media regulation from partisan pressures, reduce censorship, and promote pluralistic content standards.

Protection and Empowerment of Journalists

Enhancing safety and institutional support for journalists is also a key strategy identified in the literature. Jibrin (2023) highlights those journalists in Nigeria face threats ranging from legal harassment to physical intimidation, particularly when reporting on corruption and security matters. Jibrin advocates for stronger enforcement of laws that protect journalists, including specific provisions addressing threats, assaults, and undue detention. He also



emphasizes the need for professional unions such as the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) to provide legal aid, mental health support, and safety training for media workers. A complementary perspective from Ezeani and Mba (2021) calls for increased investment in journalists' professional development through workshops on ethical reporting and digital security, aimed at empowering practitioners to navigate hostile environments without compromising their rights or well-being.

Promoting Media Literacy and Civic Awareness

Finally, promoting media literacy and civic awareness is essential for a vibrant democratic culture. According to Nyamnjoh (2020), media literacy programs empower citizens to critically evaluate information, resist disinformation, and hold government and media accountable. Nyamnjoh's work underscores that without an informed public, even free media can fail to achieve democratic impact. Similarly, Omenugha and Ogbodo (2022) argue that integrating media literacy into formal education systems and community outreach initiatives strengthens civic engagement, enabling citizens to understand their rights and demand transparency. These efforts enhance the public's capacity to use media responsibly and resist both state and non-state attempts at information control.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between media suppression and democratic governance in Nigeria, highlighting how restrictions on freedom of expression undermine the media's capacity to function as a watchdog institution and hinder public participation in governance. Historical analysis revealed that media suppression is not a recent phenomenon but has evolved from colonial censorship to military-era repression, and now to contemporary legal, digital, and economic constraints. Contemporary cases, such as the 2021 Twitter ban and the harassment of journalists during the #EndSARS protests, illustrate the persistence and adaptability of media suppression in Nigeria. Structural and institutional challenges, including regulatory capture, economic dependence, and political interference, exacerbate this situation, while self-censorship among journalists further diminishes the effectiveness of the media in promoting transparency, accountability, and civic engagement.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several measures are critical for enhancing media freedom and strengthening democratic governance in Nigeria:

- a. Existing laws such as the Cybercrime Act, Official Secrets Act, and other restrictive provisions should be reviewed and amended to align with international standards on freedom of expression, ensuring that limitations are narrowly defined and not used to suppress dissent.



- b. Regulatory institutions, including the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), should be granted statutory autonomy, transparent appointment processes, and financial independence to prevent political influence and partisan enforcement of media codes.
- c. Comprehensive measures should be adopted to protect journalists from harassment, detention, and violence, including legal protections, safety protocols, professional development programs, and support through journalist unions and civil society initiatives.
- d. Citizens should be empowered through formal and informal media literacy programs to critically evaluate information, resist misinformation, and engage constructively in democratic discourse. An informed public reduces the effectiveness of media suppression and strengthens accountability mechanisms.
- e. The Nigerian government should review and amend existing laws such as the Cybercrimes Act and defamation laws to eliminate vague provisions that enable the suppression of free expression. Legal frameworks should align strictly with international human rights standards.
- f. Regulatory bodies like the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should be restructured to ensure operational independence, transparency, and accountability, thereby preventing political interference in media regulation.
- g. There is a need for stronger legal and institutional mechanisms to protect journalists from harassment, intimidation, unlawful arrest, and violence. This includes enforcing penalties against perpetrators of attacks on media professionals.
- h. Policies should encourage diverse media ownership to reduce monopolization by political and economic elites. This will enhance balanced reporting and ensure representation of marginalized voices.
- i. Government and private sector initiatives should support the financial sustainability of media houses without compromising editorial independence. Grants and subsidies can help reduce overreliance on politically motivated advertising.

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