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**JOURNALISM, DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION, AND THE 2027
ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Credible elections remain fundamental to democratic consolidation, political legitimacy and national unity in Nigeria. As the country approaches the 2027 general elections, enduring structural challenges - elite domination of the state, prebendal politics, weak institutions and declining public trust, continue to threaten electoral integrity. This paper interrogates the interconnections between politics, national unity and credible elections in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the role of journalism as a democratic institution. Anchored in Harold Lasswell's distributive conception of politics, political economy theory and media-democracy frameworks, the study argued that journalism occupies a strategic position in shaping electoral credibility through agenda-setting, political socialisation, investigative scrutiny and accountability enforcement. Adopting a qualitative analytical methodology based on secondary data, the paper demonstrated how regulatory pressures, ownership concentration, funding constraints and digital-era market competition undermine journalism's capacity to contribute effectively to credible elections. Drawing on Nigeria's electoral experience from 2015 to 2023, the paper concluded that without a structurally independent, pluralistic and professionally protected media system, the prospects for credible elections in 2027, and by extension national unity, remain fragile.

Keywords: Credible elections; Democracy; Journalism; National Unity; Nigeria; 2027 elections

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Résumé

Des élections crédibles demeurent fondamentales pour la consolidation démocratique, la légitimité politique et l'unité nationale au Nigéria. À l'approche des élections générales de 2027, des défis structurels persistants – domination de l'État par les élites, corruption politique, faiblesse des institutions et érosion de la confiance du public – continuent de menacer l'intégrité du scrutin. Cet article examine les interconnexions entre politique, unité nationale et élections crédibles au Nigéria, en s'intéressant particulièrement au rôle du journalisme en tant qu'institution démocratique. S'appuyant sur la conception distributive de la politique d'Harold Lasswell, la théorie de l'économie politique et le cadre d'analyse des relations entre médias et démocratie, l'étude soutient que le journalisme occupe une place stratégique dans la construction de la crédibilité électorale par la définition de l'agenda politique, la socialisation politique, le travail d'investigation et le contrôle de la reddition des comptes. Adoptant une méthodologie d'analyse qualitative fondée sur des données secondaires, l'article démontre comment les pressions réglementaires, la concentration des médias, les contraintes budgétaires et la concurrence du marché numérique compromettent la capacité du journalisme à contribuer efficacement à des élections crédibles. S'appuyant sur l'expérience électorale du Nigéria entre 2015 et 2023, l'article conclut que, sans un système médiatique structurellement indépendant, pluraliste et bénéficiant d'une protection professionnelle, les perspectives d'élections crédibles en 2027, et par extension l'unité nationale, demeurent fragiles.

Mots-clés: Élections crédibles ; Démocratie ; Journalisme ; Unité nationale ; Nigéria ; Élections de 2027

Introduction

Elections constitute the procedural foundation of representative democracy and the principal mechanism through which political authority is legitimized (Schumpeter, 1942). In plural and deeply divided societies such as Nigeria, elections also perform an integrative function by mediating competition among contending ethnic, regional and ideological interests. Where elections are perceived as credible, they foster political inclusion, enhance regime legitimacy and contribute to national cohesion. Conversely, where elections are widely regarded as fraudulent, they deepen mistrust, fuel conflict, and undermine the foundations of statehood.

Nigeria's post-independence political history reveals a persistent crisis of electoral credibility. From the disputed elections of the First Republic to the annulment of the 1993 presidential election, and from the flawed polls of the early Fourth Republic to the controversies surrounding the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections, electoral processes have often generated instability rather than democratic consolidation (Diamond, 1999). Voter apathy, post-election litigation, and episodic violence have become defining features of Nigeria's electoral landscape.

As the country approaches the 2027 general elections, public confidence in the electoral process remains fragile. Allegations of elite interference, institutional weakness, selective enforcement of electoral laws, and compromised media narratives continue to shape public perceptions. Within this context, journalism occupies a strategic position as a mediator between political actors, institutions, and citizens. This paper, therefore, examines the nexus between

politics, national unity, and the quest for credible elections in Nigeria's 2027 general elections, with particular emphasis on the structural and functional role of journalism.

Theoretical Framework: Politics, Power, and Distribution

Politics, as classically defined by Harold Lasswell, concerns “who gets what, when and how” (Lasswell, 1936). In his world view, Lasswell viewed politics as involving changes in the distribution of value patterns in society, and how much power one had was a strong determinant of how much of the values one was able to acquire or receive from the distribution process. To Lasswell, the derivable dividend that accrues to an individual or group within the political system was dependent on how they were located within the power dynamics of the specific political system. So, while values were seen by Lasswell as desired goals, power was “the ability to participate in decisions” and “political power the ability to produce intended effects on other people.”

There are several other definitions and perspectives of what politics is or what it is not, but the author aligns with Lasswell. Why so? Because Lasswell's definition speaks to the heart of Nigeria's problem of the distribution of its common patrimony. This distributive conception remains particularly relevant to Nigeria, where access to political power largely determines access to economic resources, social opportunities and state patronage. It is what fuels and sustains the lopsided federal structure of Nigeria since the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates of Nigeria and the Colony of Lagos in what the author describes as the Fraudulent Social Contract of 1914. The imbalance in the power dynamics of the Nigerian political space accounts for the many horizontal and vertical inequalities between and among the social strata, leading to a plethora of political violence, ethnic irredentism, militancy, insurgency, terrorism, banditry, and other forms of social malaise.

The challenge of Nigeria's unity is also traceable to the subject of “Who Gets What, When and How.” That is why non-state actors like IPOB, Oduduwa Nation, Boko-Haram, PANDEF, Ohaneze Ndigbo, Middle Belt Forum, Arewa Forum, and MOSSOP, have been on the ascendancy, claiming territorial space. Each of these groups had always pointed to the unfairness in the distribution of values from the political system, a situation that is more accentuated now with the high level of nepotism and cronyism in the dispensation of political offices in favour of one section of the country.

Political economy scholars have argued that the Nigerian state is characterised by prebendalism, whereby public offices are appropriated as instruments of personal and group enrichment (Joseph, 1987). This logic distorts democratic competition, transforming elections into zero-sum contests in which losing is equated with exclusion from the national cake. The implications for national unity are profound, as excluded groups increasingly mobilise along ethnic, regional, or religious lines. How can there be unity in an environment of skewed prebendalism, skewed in the sense that patronage, corruption, and rent seeking that the innovative Nigerian principle of ‘federal character’ was intended to moderate has been jettisoned in favour of a one-sided appropriation of the political rewards system for a favoured region. Or would we be wrong to affirm that the basis of Nigeria's unity is dependent on how well the “federal system operates to ensure the intergovernmental distribution and ethno-political appropriation of centrally collected oil revenues?” (Suberu, 2013). And when this is not the case, we begin to witness cracks and fissures in the contraption called Nigeria.

This precarious situation has been a major reason for the quest for credible elections. Many believe that the only way to improve our politics and enhance national unity is to provide credible elections, especially as we approach the next round of general elections in 2027. Credible elections are central to democratic legitimacy. Electoral credibility implies transparency, competitiveness, impartial administration, and respect for voter choice (Norris, 2014). Credible elections function as mechanisms for negotiating inclusion within the Nigerian state and serve as a barometer for measuring the success of any democracy, helping with regime change and peaceful transitions from one government to another.

Beyond technical compliance, legitimacy is derived from public belief in the fairness of the process. In Nigeria, recurrent electoral controversies have eroded this belief. Vote-buying, manipulation of results, partisan behaviour by electoral officials, and excessive judicialization of electoral outcomes have become routine (Collier & Vicente, 2012). The consequence is a democratic culture characterised by cynicism and declining participation. When elections lack credibility, distributive imbalances are reinforced, further delegitimising the state and weakening national cohesion (Ake, 1981). A government that comes into power through a flawed and questionable electoral process is bound to face challenges to its legitimacy, which could lead to forceful regime change. And where forceful regime change is interpreted as or seen as executed by actors from one ethnic group, it could lead to war, as demonstrated by history in the case of the Nigerian Civil War (1967 to 1970). Therefore, for a multi-ethnic federation like Nigeria, the costs of electoral illegitimacy are especially high. Perceived exclusion reinforces narratives of domination and marginalisation, intensifying ethno-regional tensions and threatening national unity (Osaghae, 1998). The quest for credible elections in 2027 must therefore be understood as both a democratic and nation-building imperative.

Nevertheless, while the author agrees that having credible elections is critical for the survival of our fledgling democracy, other measures must be taken to deepen the roots of our democracy. It is in this respect that journalism plays a vital role. As Walter Lippmann argued, democracy falters in the absence of a steady supply of trustworthy and relevant news, since citizens depend on reliable information to form meaningful political judgments (Lippmann, 1922). In a similar vein, Professor Fenton (Fenton, 2010) argued that a healthy news media is the lifeblood of democracy because news provides, or should provide, the vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation, and analysis that enable citizens to participate in political life and allow democracy to function more effectively. This normative conception of journalism draws its origins from democratic media theory and posits that democratic communication requires a plurality of independent news sources, freedom from state and corporate interference, and a media system capable of holding the powerful to account and facilitating dialogue across a range of views (Fenton, 2010; Curran, 2002; Habermas, 1989; and McChesney, 2004).

This relationship, however, represents an idealized vision rooted in the notion of independent, public-interest journalism, in which journalism is conceived as the fourth estate and is intrinsically connected to public knowledge, political engagement, and democratic revitalisation. In practice, this ideal is frequently undermined. Bridging the divide between the normative aspiration of a robust public sphere and the actual conditions under which news is produced and disseminated, and interrogating the structural reasons for this disconnect, is essential to understanding how democratic systems can be strengthened and made more effective.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative analytical methodology grounded in political economy and media–democracy theory. It relies on secondary data drawn from scholarly literature, electoral reports, policy documents, media content and institutional publications on Nigeria’s democratic experience. This approach is appropriate for examining structural relationships between journalism, electoral credibility and national unity rather than individual voting behaviour.

The analysis proceeds through thematic interpretation of Nigeria’s electoral experience between 2015 and 2023, focusing on media performance, regulatory environments and electoral outcomes. By synthesising insights from political science and media studies, the paper develops an integrated understanding of journalism’s role within Nigeria’s broader power relations.

Findings

Journalism and Democratic Consolidation

Democratic theory accords journalism a central role in sustaining democracy. Access to alternative sources of information is identified as a core democratic requirement (Dahl, 1989), while the public sphere is expected to facilitate rational-critical debate (Habermas, 1989). Journalism contributes to credible elections by informing citizens, scrutinising power and exposing malpractice. In Nigeria, journalism historically played a progressive role in anti-colonial mobilisation and resistance to military authoritarianism (Omu, 1978). Journalists were instrumental in the struggle that culminated in the restoration of civilian rule in 1999. However, democratic transition has exposed journalism to new structural pressures that complicate its democratic mandate.

The Nigerian Mass Media, as we know it, started in 1859 with the publication of *Iwe Irohin* by Rev. Henry Townsend, a Briton. The publication was in Yoruba and represents the very first news media published in Nigeria. This was followed by the establishment of two separate news outfits by Chief Obafemi Awolowo and Dr, Nnamdi Azikiwe to further their political interests and nationalist rhetoric against the colonialists in the fight for independence. The Federal Government also established its own media outfit called *The Morning Post* but this did not last as the people kicked against the newspaper for its pro-government slant. Later, the Federal Government decided to buy 60% shares of the *Daily Times Newspaper*, which was initially founded by Richard Barrow, Adeyemo Alakija, and V. R. Osborn, to take over the *African Messenger*, published by Ernest Ikoli. Many Nigerians had viewed the *Daily Times Newspaper* as a fair newspaper with balanced view.

Aside from the news media, the electronic media – radio and television have also played a great role in the development of journalism in Nigeria. In 1967, during the outbreak of the Nigeria Civil War, the Federal Government took over control of all existing radio and television broadcasting stations in the country. However, this was reversed by General Babangida with the promulgation of Decree 32 of 1992 during his reign as military leader, allowing the establishment of privately owned radio and television broadcasting stations. This heralded a new era in the growth of journalism in Nigeria, bringing healthy competition among private operators of these media outfits and better service delivery to Nigerians.

The point needs to be made here that since the early days of journalism in Nigeria, it has been for the public good. Nigerian journalism has been at the forefront of fighting against colonial rule, defending the masses against wrong policies of government and standing on the side of the

people to stamp out oppression and dictatorship. Many agree that journalism played a massive role in the struggle against military rule, and many journalists have paid dearly for it. Prominent was the case of Dele Giwa, who was assassinated using a letter bomb. Looking back two decades to the birth of our 4th republic on May 29, 1999, Nigerian journalists can give themselves a pat on the back for the role they played in restoring democracy in Nigeria. But beyond that, there is the role they must play in sustaining and growing democracy in the country.

It is important to stress that the relationship between journalism and democracy is not a straight-line (linear) relationship and depends on several factors. These factors include, but are not limited to, the nature of the economy and the market, the state of Nigeria's democracy, Nigeria's political culture and media policy, media and communication technologies and formats as well as globalisation and social and cultural issues such as literacy, poverty, religious differences, and daily rituals. Each of these factors influences media circulation and media consumption, and they also impact how effective Nigeria's democracy functions (Fenton, 2010). Let's explore some of these factors within the context of Nigeria's democracy.

Journalism's role within Nigeria's democratic system Systems

A rigorous understanding of journalism's role within Nigeria's democratic system requires close attention to the structural forces that shape news production. News content is influenced, first, by journalism's positional relationship to other dominant fields within the political and economic order, and second, by dynamics internal to the journalistic field itself, including professional cultures, institutional routines, and patterns of social and class differentiation.

Within the political field, the state exercises significant influence over the conditions of journalistic practice. This influence manifests in the extent to which government institutions constrain or enable the diversity of voices and perspectives represented in the media, as well as the volume and nature of critical reporting. Such power is exercised through regulatory and subsidy regimes, control over access to official information, and the broader structuring of party systems and electoral processes. Recent developments in Nigeria, most notably state actions to restrict digital platforms and intensify regulatory oversight of social media, illustrate the capacity of government to curtail pluralism and suppress dissenting voices within the public sphere.

The economic field, by contrast, refers to the commercial constraints that shape journalistic output. These include concentration of media ownership, profit imperatives associated with different ownership structures, dependence on advertising or audience revenues, and the level and intensity of market competition. Such economic pressures have profound implications for editorial independence, content diversity and the prioritisation of public-interest journalism.

Crucially, the political and economic fields are deeply interconnected and frequently reinforce one another. Policy decisions originating within the political field, such as media regulation or deregulation affecting ownership concentration, inevitably generate consequences within the economic field, altering market structures and commercial incentives. The combined effect of these interlocking constraints significantly shapes the capacity of journalism to function as an autonomous democratic institution.

State Regulation

State authority exerts a profound influence over the practice of journalism through regulatory frameworks that define acceptable professional conduct and determine the permissible scope of media ownership and concentration. In Nigeria, this influence has historically oscillated between overt repression and more subtle forms of control. A notable example is Decree No. 4 of 1984, formally titled the Protection Against False Accusations Decree, enacted under the military regime

of Muhammadu Buhari and widely regarded as one of the most repressive press laws in Nigeria's history. The decree empowered the state to shut down newspapers and broadcast outlets deemed inimical to regime interests, while its expansive definitions of defamation and libel effectively curtailed critical scrutiny of public officials and governmental actions.

Contemporary democratic governance has not entirely dispelled these restrictive tendencies. Proposals under the Buhari civilian administration to amend the Press Council Act introduced provisions requiring licensing for the establishment and operation of press organisations, extending regulatory control beyond source protection to the foundational existence of media institutions themselves. Similarly, proposed amendments to the National Broadcasting Commission Act aimed at regulating digital and social media platforms signal an expanding regulatory reach. Collectively, such measures risk constraining pluralism and undermining journalism's democratic function.

Beyond formal legislation, journalists in Nigeria have frequently encountered coercive practices by law enforcement and security agencies. Instances of detention, surveillance and arrest of journalists following critical reporting exemplify how state power can be deployed to intimidate the press. The use of telecommunications surveillance to monitor journalists' communications and subsequently facilitate arrests illustrates how expanded state surveillance capacities place journalistic investigations, sources, and professional autonomy under legal jeopardy.

At the same time, regulation is not inherently inimical to democratic journalism. Legal instruments such as the Freedom of Information Act provide journalists with enforceable rights to access public information, thereby strengthening transparency and accountability. More broadly, regulatory frameworks protecting press freedom, access to information, and public interest defenses can safeguard journalistic practice while also protecting citizens' rights to privacy. When appropriately designed, regulation can enhance media pluralism, curb the excesses of commercialised news production, and ensure that journalism, even when operating within market logics, remains anchored to its democratic responsibilities.

Concentration of Ownership

The extent to which media ownership is concentrated or dispersed carries significant implications for democratic practice, particularly in electoral contexts such as Nigeria's forthcoming 2027 general elections. Where ownership of major news outlets is concentrated in a limited number of hands, control over political information becomes similarly restricted, enabling a small group of proprietors to exert disproportionate influence over public knowledge and political discourse. Such concentration creates conditions in which wealthy media owners accumulate substantial social and political power, often cultivating close relationships with entrenched interests. In these circumstances, journalism's capacity to speak truth to power and hold political authority accountable is seriously diminished (McChesney, 2004).

Scholarly analyses, synthesised by Fenton (Fenton, 2010), indicated that as media organisations grow larger and ownership becomes increasingly concentrated, political elites become more attentive to maintaining favourable relationships with proprietors, senior executives, and editors. As a result, a media system may present the appearance of plurality through multiple platforms and channels while remaining structurally inimical to democratic competition if effective control is exercised by a dominant owner or corporate group. In an electoral cycle as politically consequential as 2027, such structural imbalances risk distorting issue framing, candidate visibility, and the broader informational environment within which citizens make electoral choices.

Media proprietors also influence editorial agendas, either through direct intervention or through organizational cultures aligned with proprietorial interests, thereby shaping the boundaries of public debate. Comparative experience illustrates this dynamic, notably in the ideological polarisation between CNN and Fox News in the United States, and in Nigeria, where prominent broadcast outlets, e.g., the TVC, exhibited overt partisan alignments during electoral periods. These patterns underscore how ownership structures translate into agenda-setting power with tangible consequences for electoral credibility and democratic legitimacy (Curran, 2002).

Unchecked concentration of media ownership further enables dominant firms to accumulate economic resources alongside political influence, with adverse consequences for ethical journalism. Such market dominance generates excessive media power capable of producing a climate of fear, particularly among political actors concerned about reputational damage and electoral vulnerability arising from adverse coverage. Journalists are similarly affected: employment precarity within highly commercialised media organisations can foster compliance, discouraging resistance to managerial pressures that prioritise profit over public interest reporting (Benson, 2010). Crucially, as Fenton and Freedman argued, democratic freedom for citizens depends on political systems that are not distorted by the private interests of powerful media conglomerates. Where both journalists and governments are beholden to concentrated corporate power, meaningful democratic choice—especially during elections—is constrained for all but the most powerful actors (Fenton & Freedman, 2014).

Types of Funding

The funding structures of media organisations, much like ownership patterns, are central to understanding the tensions between journalism and democracy, particularly during election cycles. Journalism is a resource-intensive enterprise, and the sources of financial support significantly shape editorial autonomy and news priorities. In Nigeria, state-funded public service media - such as government-owned broadcast corporations and newspapers - operate within fiscal arrangements that structurally constrain sustained critical scrutiny of incumbent authorities. During electoral campaigns, this dependency often translates into favourable coverage of ruling parties, disproportionate access to airtime, and muted interrogation of official narratives.

Privately owned media organisations, by contrast, are largely dependent on advertising revenue, including political advertising during election periods. This reliance creates incentives to privilege candidates, parties, or corporate actors capable of purchasing substantial advertising space, thereby blurring the boundary between editorial judgment and commercial interest. As campaign advertising intensifies ahead of the 2027 general elections, such financial pressures risk skewing issue framing, candidate visibility, and tone of coverage, producing systematic media bias that undermines electoral fairness.

These dynamics are compounded in the digital age, where traditional revenue models have collapsed due to declining print circulation and the migration of advertising to online platforms. As Benson argued, commercial pressures increasingly narrow ideological diversity, favouring market-friendly actors while marginalising labour groups and civil society voices (Benson, 2010). In the context of Nigeria's 2027 elections, these funding-driven distortions threaten the media's capacity to provide balanced campaign coverage and to serve as an impartial forum for democratic deliberation.

Types of Ownership

Persistent instability in media funding, alongside the limitations of purely commercial and exclusively state-owned ownership models, has renewed interest in alternative institutional

arrangements better suited to sustaining independent, public-interest journalism. Emerging proposals emphasise cooperative, community-based and charitable ownership structures, supported by diversified revenue mechanisms such as public-interest levies and targeted subsidies.

In Nigeria, community radio initiatives and donor-supported investigative journalism platforms demonstrate the viability of such hybrid models. Comparable experiences in Ghana, where community radio has strengthened local political participation and electoral engagement (Berger, 2010) and in South Africa, where non-profit investigative outlets such as amaBhungane operate through philanthropic funding (Wasserman, 2013), underscore the democratic value of these approaches. As Nigeria approaches the 2027 general elections, the establishment of an independently administered Public Interest Media Fund (PIMF) could strengthen media autonomy, expand pluralism in campaign coverage, and reinforce journalism's role in democratic accountability.

Level and intensity of market competition

Across the globe, technological transformation has profoundly reshaped the contemporary news environment, and Nigeria is no exception. The rapid expansion of digital platforms, 24-hour television news, and mobile-based journalism has significantly accelerated the pace of news production and circulation (Fenton, 2010). In Nigeria's highly competitive media market, characterised by a mix of legacy newspapers, broadcast stations, and digital-only platforms, news organisations are under increasing pressure to publish continuously and in real time. These pressures, compounded by declining advertising revenues and fragile business models, have resulted in reduced newsroom staffing, particularly within print journalism, where layoffs and casualisation of labour have become widespread (Fenton, 2010)

The contraction of newsroom resources has had significant implications for journalistic practice. Nigerian journalists are frequently required to generate multiple stories daily across platforms, leaving limited time for verification or investigative reporting. This environment has encouraged heavy reliance on wire copy, official statements, and press releases from government institutions, political parties, and corporate public relations units. The practice commonly described as "churnalism" has become evident in the routine recycling of identical political stories across newspapers and online news sites, especially during election periods when campaign communication dominates the news agenda (Davies, 2008; Lee-Wright, *et al*, 2011).

In digital newsrooms, journalists increasingly devote time to monitoring rival outlets, social media trends, and user-generated content. Stories originating from a single authoritative source, such as briefings by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) or statements from major political parties, are often reproduced with minimal editorial differentiation across platforms. Empirical studies of online news production indicate that despite the abundance of information in the digital sphere, news coverage remains strikingly homogeneous, with organisations repeatedly framing stories from similar angles and relying on identical informational sources (Redden & Witschge, 2010). Under intense time pressure, journalists prioritise readily available and familiar sources over the complex task of verifying user-generated content or navigating the informational overload of digital environments (Fenton, 2010).

These developments reflect a media environment increasingly governed by commercial logics, where rationalization through staff reductions and marketisation through the commodification of news displace normative democratic objectives. Rather than enhancing plurality, digital transformation has frequently contributed to content homogenization (Fenton, 2010). When this faster and more superficial form of journalism converges with the commercial

imperative to attract audiences, professional journalistic norms are often subordinated to sensationalism, spectacle, and emotive political framing.

In Nigeria's democratic trajectory, these trends carry particular significance as the country approaches the 2027 general elections. The tabloidisation of political coverage risks marginalising substantive policy debate and weakening journalism's capacity to provide voters with the information required for meaningful electoral choice. Moreover, the growing dominance of a limited number of powerful media organisations challenges the assumption that greater media abundance in the digital age necessarily strengthens democracy (Fenton, 2010; Redden & Witschge, 2010).

Journalism, Technology, and Nigeria's Recent Elections (2015–2023)

Nigeria's recent elections illustrate both the promise and limitations of journalism. The introduction of electoral technologies such as the Smart Card Reader and Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was intended to enhance credibility, yet their effectiveness depended heavily on media scrutiny and public communication (Layiwola, 2023). Studies of the 2023 elections demonstrate how insecurity and electoral violence undermined voter participation and confidence, particularly in conflict-prone regions (Yusuf, 2023). Meanwhile, social media has emerged as a dominant arena of political communication, shaping narratives, mobilisation and misinformation across the 2015, 2019 and 2023 election cycles (Chukwu, 2025). While digital platforms expand participation, weak professional standards and regulatory uncertainty have amplified misinformation, complicating journalism's democratic role.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This paper has demonstrated that credible elections, national unity, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria are inseparable from the condition of journalism. Elections in Nigeria are embedded within a political economy that is characterised by distributive struggles over state resources, making electoral credibility essential to political stability. As the 2027 general elections beckons, journalism's capacity to contribute to credibility is contingent upon the willingness of the government to embark on far-reaching reforms that would strengthen press freedom protections, promote media pluralism, develop sustainable funding models, and reinforce professional ethics. Without these measures, journalism will remain structurally constrained, and the quest for credible elections will continue to elude Nigeria's democratic project.

An independent news media insulated from governmental interference and excessive commercial pressures is widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic governance (Fenton, 2010). Normatively, such a media system is expected to promote content diversity, amplify plural voices, and enable citizens to form informed judgments on public affairs. In practice, however, journalism often operates under structural constraints that undermine these ideals. Democratic resilience, therefore, requires not only the absence of overt state control but also legislative frameworks that actively support public-interest journalism and curb destructive market concentration. When media ownership becomes excessively consolidated, editorial independence is weakened, alternative voices are marginalised, and smaller outlets are forced out of the market, conditions increasingly incompatible with democratic accountability (McChesney, 2008).

One of the most contested issues in contemporary journalism concerns the regulation of privacy and its relationship to press freedom. In established democracies, ongoing debates question whether professional codes of conduct alone are sufficient to protect citizens from intrusive reporting while shielding journalists from editorial pressures driven by commercial imperatives (Davies, 2008). Digital technologies have further complicated these concerns by eroding

traditional boundaries between public and private life, accelerating information flows, and amplifying ethical risks associated with data misuse and sensational exposure (Fenton, 2010).

While it is persuasive to argue that digital transformation has reinforced existing power relations to the advantage of global media conglomerates, such claims require nuance. Political-economy analyses demonstrate a deepening entrenchment of corporate power, as news media remain fundamentally commercial enterprises in which news is treated as a commodity (McChesney, 2008). High barriers to entry persist for new actors in both traditional and digital news markets, and ownership concentration increasingly extends into online spaces. As established media organisations invest heavily in largely unprofitable digital operations, commercial pressures encourage cost-cutting and reliance on low-cost newsgathering practices, undermining original and investigative journalism (Fenton, 2010). Consequently, online discourse is often dominated by established players reproducing similar editorial priorities, limiting rather than expanding diversity (Redden & Witschge, 2010).

Theories of democratic participation have long recognised the central role of the media in fostering political awareness and civic engagement (Habermas, 1989). News is fundamental to democratic life. However, the assumption that an abundance of news necessarily strengthens democracy reflects a naïve pluralism repeatedly challenged by empirical research (Fenton, 2010). High volumes of news output or consumption do not enhance democracy when content primarily serves industry interests rather than public informational needs. Under such conditions, coverage may fuel political cynicism, intensify anti-political sentiment, and discourage meaningful participation in the public sphere.

As Nigeria approaches the 2027 general elections, these dynamics highlight urgent policy imperatives. Electoral regulation should enforce transparent rules on political advertising, equitable access to media platforms, and clear separation between editorial content and paid political communication. Media reform should prioritise anti-concentration measures, strengthen independent regulation insulated from political interference, and establish a Public Interest Media Fund (PIMF) to support investigative and election-focused journalism. Together, these measures are critical to ensuring that Nigeria's media system contributes to credible elections, informed voter choice, and democratic consolidation.

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