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Assessing The Challenges to Media Freedom Among Radio Journalists in Nigeria.

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[0227] Abstract
This article assessed the challenges to media freedom among radio journalists in Nigeria through a qualitative review of existing literature. Guided by the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, the study relied on secondary data obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, official reports and relevant legal documents. The reviewed literature revealed that despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting remains constrained by political interference, regulatory pressures, ownership influence, economic challenges, journalist insecurity and commercial interests, all of which undermine editorial independence and the democratic role of radio. The study further found that while regulation is necessary for professional broadcasting, its implementation should not compromise journalistic autonomy. The article concludes that strengthening media freedom requires transparent regulation, improved protection for journalists, respect for editorial independence and enhanced institutional support for ethical journalism. It recommends reforms aimed at creating an enabling environment in which radio broadcasters can effectively fulfill their democratic responsibilities and serve the public interest.
Keywords: Editorial Independence, Democratic Communication, Media freedom, Nigeria, Radio broadcasting.

1. Introduction

Background of Study

Media freedom remains one of the defining principles of democratic governance because it enables journalists and media organizations to gather, process, and disseminate information without undue interference from state or non-state actors. The media's ability to report freely enhances transparency, promotes accountability, encourages civic participation, and strengthens democratic institutions. UNESCO (2022) describes journalism as a public good whose effectiveness depends largely on the protection of freedom of expression, editorial independence, access to information, and the safety of journalists. Recent UNESCO initiatives in Nigeria have further reaffirmed that protecting press freedom is essential to democratic accountability and information integrity. In Nigeria, radio continues to occupy a strategic position within the media landscape despite the rapid growth of digital communication technologies. Its affordability, extensive geographical coverage, immediacy, and ability to communicate in indigenous languages make it the most accessible medium for millions of Nigerians, particularly those in rural and underserved communities. Consequently, radio remains a major platform for news dissemination, public enlightenment, political communication, health campaigns, conflict reporting, and citizen engagement. However, the effectiveness of radio broadcasting depends largely on the extent to which broadcasters are able to perform their professional responsibilities without intimidation, censorship, or undue influence.

Although Nigeria's democratic transition has expanded opportunities for media pluralism through the proliferation of privately owned broadcast stations, concerns regarding media freedom persist. Ojo (2018) argues that structural weaknesses within Nigeria's political and economic environment continue to undermine the sustainability and independence of news media organizations. These structural constraints include ownership concentration, political influence, weak institutional safeguards, and commercial pressures, all of which have implications for editorial autonomy and

journalistic practice. Recent empirical studies equally suggest that the challenges confronting Nigerian journalists have become increasingly complex. Uwalaka and Amadi (2024) found that online harassment has emerged as a significant threat to journalists, with many media professionals experiencing intimidation capable of influencing editorial decisions and encouraging self-censorship. Similarly, Uwalaka, Amadi, and Enyindah (2024) reported that public hostility and violence against journalists contribute to an environment that undermines press freedom and weakens the media's watchdog role in Nigeria's democracy. These developments demonstrate that threats to media freedom extend beyond formal state censorship to include digital abuse, societal hostility, and other forms of pressure capable of restricting independent journalism.

The broadcasting sector presents a particularly important context for examining these concerns because radio stations operate within statutory licensing and regulatory frameworks while simultaneously navigating political, commercial, and public expectations. A recent study by Pate and Jibril (2025) revealed that journalists covering conflict and insecurity in Nigeria frequently encounter threats that affect their professional safety and reporting practices, highlighting the practical difficulties associated with exercising media freedom within challenging operational environments. Likewise, Uwalaka and Wokoro (2026) demonstrated that legal threats, pressure campaigns, and self-censorship can significantly constrain journalists' ability to report sensitive issues, thereby limiting the democratic functions of the press. Despite growing scholarly interest in journalism, media regulation, and press freedom in Nigeria, comparatively fewer studies have focused specifically on media freedom within radio broadcasting. Much of the existing literature addresses the Nigerian media broadly, with limited attention to the distinctive institutional and professional realities of radio broadcasters. This article therefore assessed the challenges to media freedom among radio journalists in Nigeria by reviewing contemporary literature on the legal, political, regulatory, and institutional factors shaping the freedom and professional practice of radio broadcasters in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and the continued expansion of Nigeria's broadcasting industry, media freedom remains a significant concern within the country's radio sector. Recent studies have shown that Nigerian journalists continue to operate under conditions characterized by intimidation, harassment, political pressure, and other forms of interference that undermine editorial independence. Uwalaka and Amadi (2024) found that online harassment has become a recurring challenge for Nigerian journalists, with many respondents admitting that such experiences influence professional judgment and encourage self-censorship. Similarly, Pate and Jibril (2025), in their study on journalists covering insurgency in North-East Nigeria, reported that threats to journalists' safety significantly affect news gathering and reporting, thereby limiting the media's ability to perform its watchdog role effectively. These findings suggest that legal guarantees of press freedom have not translated into a sufficiently enabling environment for journalism practice in Nigeria.

However, while recent scholarship has examined journalist safety, online harassment, and press freedom within the broader Nigerian media landscape (Uwalaka & Amadi, 2024; Uwalaka, Amadi, & Enyindah, 2024; Pate & Jibril, 2025), comparatively little attention has been devoted to synthesizing the specific challenges confronting radio broadcasters, whose operations are uniquely shaped by broadcasting regulation, licensing requirements, ownership structures, and editorial controls. This limited focus leaves an important gap in understanding the nature and implications of media freedom within Nigerian radio broadcasting. It is this gap that this study seeks to address by examining existing literature on media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting and highlighting its implications for journalism practice and democratic governance.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to assess the challenges to media freedom among radio journalists in Nigeria. The specific objectives are to: (a) Examine the nature and significance of media freedom within Nigerian radio broadcasting. (b) Investigate the factors constraining media freedom among radio

broadcasters in Nigeria. (c) Assess the implications of limited media freedom for radio journalism practice and democratic communication in Nigeria. (d) Examine the role of regulatory and institutional frameworks in shaping media freedom within the Nigerian radio broadcasting sector.

Concept of Media Freedom

Media freedom is one of the most extensively debated concepts in communication and media studies because of its close relationship with freedom of expression, democratic governance, and citizens' right to access information. Although there is no universally accepted definition, contemporary scholarship generally conceives media freedom as the ability of media organizations and journalists to gather, produce, and disseminate information independently, without undue interference from governments, political actors, media owners, commercial interests, or other powerful institutions. UNESCO's recent work on freedom of expression and media development presents media freedom as a multidimensional concept encompassing editorial independence, media pluralism, access to information, journalists' safety, and an enabling legal and regulatory environment. According to UNESCO (2025), societies where these conditions are protected are more likely to experience transparency, accountability, democratic participation, and sustainable development.

Recent scholarship has shifted from viewing media freedom merely as the absence of state censorship to understanding it as a product of broader political, economic, institutional, and technological conditions. Waisbord (2018) argues that contemporary threats to journalism increasingly arise from political polarization, commercial pressures, digital transformation, and declining institutional trust rather than direct government repression alone. Similarly, Hanitzsch et al. (2019) contend that journalistic autonomy differs across societies because newsroom practices are shaped by political systems, ownership structures, professional cultures, and organizational routines. These perspectives suggest that assessing media freedom requires examining the wider environment within which journalism is practiced rather than relying solely on constitutional guarantees. Another important dimension of the concept concerns the relationship between media freedom and democracy. Contemporary democratic theory recognizes the media as an institution responsible for facilitating informed public discourse, monitoring those in authority, and providing citizens with diverse viewpoints on matters of public concern. UNESCO (2025) argues that independent, pluralistic and professional journalism remains indispensable for democratic accountability because it strengthens access to credible information and encourages meaningful civic participation.

In the same vein, recent discussions on World Press Freedom Day in Nigeria emphasized that press freedom should be regarded not merely as a media concern but as a fundamental condition for open, accountable and peaceful societies. African scholarship similarly demonstrates that media freedom should be understood beyond constitutional recognition of freedom of expression. Recent studies argue that many African countries formally guarantee press freedom while journalists continue to encounter political interference, restrictive regulatory practices, ownership influence, economic vulnerability, intimidation, and digital attacks that constrain editorial independence. This perspective suggests that legal recognition of press freedom does not necessarily translate into practical freedom for journalists, particularly where institutional safeguards remain weak or enforcement mechanisms are inconsistent. Within the Nigerian context, the concept of media freedom has become increasingly associated with debates on press regulation, journalist safety, censorship, and editorial autonomy. Oyinloye, Oyegoke, Odion and Ojewumi (2024) argue that media freedom in Nigeria is continually negotiated within a regulatory environment where concerns about censorship, government influence, and media independence remain prominent. Similarly, recent legal scholarship by UNESCO (2024) stresses that effective protection of media freedom requires not only constitutional guarantees but also judicial understanding of freedom of expression, access to information, and the safety of journalists. These arguments reinforce the view that genuine media freedom depends on the interaction between legal protection, institutional independence, professional ethics, and practical working conditions for journalists.

From the foregoing perspectives, media freedom is not an absolute or static concept but a dynamic condition influenced by legal, political, economic, technological, and institutional realities. For the purpose of this study, media freedom is conceptualized as the extent to which radio broadcasters in Nigeria can independently gather, process, and disseminate information in the public interest without undue political, regulatory, economic, ownership, or other external pressures capable of undermining editorial independence and professional journalism.

Radio Broadcasting in Nigeria: Radio broadcasting occupies a strategic position in Nigeria's communication system because of its ability to disseminate information rapidly to diverse audiences irrespective of geographical location, literacy level, or socio-economic status. Unlike newspapers and most digital media that require literacy or Internet connectivity, radio combines affordability, portability, immediacy and multilingual programming, making it the most accessible medium of communication for millions of Nigerians. Consequently, scholars have consistently recognized radio as an effective instrument for news dissemination, political mobilization, public enlightenment, education, entertainment and national integration. Agbanu and Nwammuo (2022) argue that radio remains the backbone of Nigeria's broadcasting industry because of its extensive reach and its ability to communicate effectively with heterogeneous audiences across urban and rural communities.

The evolution of radio broadcasting in Nigeria reflects the country's political, technological and democratic development. Radio broadcasting began during the colonial era through the Radio Distribution Service (RDS) in 1933, which relayed programmes from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to Nigerian audiences. Following independence, broadcasting became an important instrument for national development and government communication, leading to the establishment of regional and federal broadcasting stations. A major turning point occurred with the deregulation of the broadcasting sector following the establishment of the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) through Decree No. 38 of 1992 (now Cap. N11, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria, 2004), which permitted private ownership of radio and television stations. This policy significantly expanded the Nigerian broadcasting landscape by increasing the number of commercial, religious, educational and community-oriented radio stations operating across the country. Studies on Nigerian broadcasting acknowledge that deregulation enhanced media plurality and widened citizens' access to information, although it also introduced new challenges relating to regulation, ownership and competition.

Beyond its historical development, radio has remained an indispensable medium for development communication because of its capacity to reach underserved populations. Ijeh and Ojebode (2023) observe that broadcasting has historically been used in Nigeria to promote education, agriculture, health campaigns and civic enlightenment through formal and informal educational programming. Their review demonstrates that radio has consistently served as a cost-effective platform for transmitting educational and developmental messages to dispersed audiences, particularly in communities with limited access to formal educational resources. Similarly, Azubuike and Uchegbuo (2022) found that radio broadcasting contributes significantly to cultural preservation by promoting indigenous languages and strengthening ethnic identity through local programming. These studies illustrate that the significance of radio extends beyond news dissemination to encompass broader developmental and socio-cultural functions. Contemporary scholarship further suggests that Nigerian radio broadcasting is undergoing significant transformation due to technological innovation and media convergence. Oyedokun and Oladesu (2022) report that the integration of information and communication technologies has improved programme production, transmission quality, audience interaction and access to broadcast content through digital platforms. Likewise, Ajetunmobi and Lasisi (2022) demonstrate that many Nigerian radio stations have successfully adopted Facebook-radio convergence to extend audience engagement beyond traditional terrestrial broadcasting, thereby expanding public participation in broadcast communication. These developments indicate that Nigerian radio broadcasting has evolved from a conventional analogue medium into a hybrid communication platform combining traditional broadcasting with digital technologies.

Despite these advancements, scholars maintain that radio broadcasting in Nigeria continues to operate within a complex environment characterized by regulatory oversight, ownership influence, commercial pressures, and evolving technological demands. While regulation is essential for promoting professionalism, ethical broadcasting and public accountability, excessive political interference or inconsistent regulatory practices may affect editorial independence and programme diversity. Recent studies on the Nigerian broadcasting industry therefore emphasize the need to strike an appropriate balance between regulatory control and editorial autonomy to preserve the democratic functions of radio broadcasting. From the foregoing, radio broadcasting in Nigeria can be understood as a dynamic communication institution that has evolved from a state-controlled medium into a pluralistic broadcasting system serving educational, informational, cultural, developmental and democratic purposes. Its extensive reach, credibility, and influence in shaping public opinion make it an appropriate context for examining issues relating to media freedom, particularly within a democratic society where access to independent and diverse information remains essential.

Media Freedom and Democratic Communication: The relationship between media freedom and democratic communication has remained a major concern in communication scholarship because democratic governance depends largely on the free flow of information between government and citizens. Democratic communication presupposes an environment in which citizens have unrestricted access to diverse, accurate and credible information that enables them to participate meaningfully in governance and hold public office holders accountable. Consequently, media freedom is widely regarded as a prerequisite for democratic consolidation, transparency and accountability rather than merely a professional privilege enjoyed by journalists. UNESCO (2025) maintains that independent and pluralistic media strengthen democratic institutions by promoting informed public debate, facilitating citizens' participation in governance, exposing abuses of power and safeguarding freedom of expression.

Similarly, the World Press Freedom Index published annually by Reporters without Borders (RSF, 2025) argues that societies with stronger media freedom generally demonstrate higher levels of governmental accountability and civic participation. Communication scholars have consistently argued that the democratic responsibility of the media extends beyond information dissemination to include agenda-setting, public deliberation, surveillance of the environment and acting as a watchdog over those in authority. Waisbord (2018) contends that journalism performs its democratic functions effectively only when editorial independence is protected from undue political and commercial influence. Hanitzsch et al. (2019) similarly argue that journalistic autonomy constitutes one of the strongest indicators of media freedom because it determines journalists' capacity to investigate issues independently and report without external interference. Their findings further suggest that where political actors, media owners or economic interests significantly influence newsroom decisions, journalism gradually loses its ability to facilitate democratic discourse.

The democratic significance of media freedom has also attracted considerable scholarly attention within Africa. Wasserman (2020) argues that although many African countries have embraced democratic governance and constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, the media continue to experience structural constraints arising from political interference, restrictive legislation, weak institutions and economic dependency. Likewise, Mutsvairo and Ragnedda (2019) observe that democratic communication in Africa is frequently challenged by attempts to control media narratives through state regulation, ownership influence and intimidation of journalists. According to these scholars, meaningful democratic participation requires not only constitutional recognition of press freedom but also institutional environments that guarantee editorial independence and journalists' safety. Within Nigeria, scholars generally agree that the media have played significant roles in promoting democratic governance through political mobilization, election coverage, civic education and investigative journalism. Oso (2020) argues that Nigerian journalism has historically contributed to democratic struggles by providing platforms for public discourse and exposing abuses of political power. Similarly, Pate (2020) maintains that the Nigerian media remain central to democratic

consolidation because they facilitate dialogue between government and citizens, promote public accountability and encourage political participation. However, both scholars acknowledge that these democratic functions are often undermined by political pressure, economic challenges, insecurity and institutional weaknesses that constrain journalistic independence.

Radio broadcasting occupies a particularly strategic position within democratic communication because of its extensive reach and accessibility across Nigeria. As the most widely consumed broadcast medium, radio provides opportunities for citizens to engage in public discussions, express opinions, receive government information and participate in democratic processes regardless of literacy level or Internet access. Agbanu and Nwammuo (2022) argue that radio remains the most effective platform for participatory communication in Nigeria because of its ability to broadcast in indigenous languages and reach rural populations that are often excluded from other forms of media communication. Similarly, studies on community broadcasting emphasize that radio promotes inclusive communication by providing local communities with opportunities to discuss governance, development and social issues directly affecting their lives. Despite these democratic contributions, recent empirical evidence suggests that the capacity of Nigerian media, particularly radio broadcasters, to perform their democratic responsibilities continues to face significant constraints. Adams and Ofordi (2024) argue that legal and extra-legal pressures, including censorship, intimidation and political interference, continue to limit editorial independence in Nigeria. Likewise, Aluko and Oloyede (2025) found that concerns over journalists' safety and government actions contribute to self-censorship and reduce investigative reporting on sensitive political issues. Complementing these findings, Andah, Moses and Sunday (2025) contend that although Nigeria's constitutional and statutory frameworks recognize freedom of expression and media freedom, inconsistencies in implementation and regulatory practices continue to generate debates regarding the actual extent of media independence within the country's broadcasting industry.

From the foregoing, media freedom and democratic communication are mutually reinforcing concepts. While democratic governance depends on the existence of an independent and pluralistic media capable of informing citizens and scrutinizing public institutions, media freedom itself flourishes where democratic institutions respect freedom of expression, uphold the rule of law and guarantee journalists' professional autonomy. In the Nigerian broadcasting context, therefore, strengthening media freedom is essential for improving democratic communication, promoting accountability and enhancing citizens' participation in governance.

Empirical Review

Pate and Jibril (2025) examined the safety of journalists reporting the Boko Haram insurgency in North-East Nigeria with the objective of assessing the effectiveness of existing safety mechanisms available to journalists working in conflict environments. The study adopted a qualitative research design and conducted in-depth interviews with 16 journalists drawn from different media organizations operating in the region. The findings revealed that journalists routinely encountered physical attacks, psychological trauma, intimidation from insurgents, security personnel and local communities, while the absence of adequate institutional protection undermined their professional performance and media freedom. Although the study provides rich empirical evidence from journalists' lived experiences, its focus on conflict reporting in North-East Nigeria limits the generalizability of its findings. Nevertheless, it is relevant to the present study because it demonstrates how insecurity constrains media freedom, an issue that also affects radio broadcasters in Nigeria alongside political, regulatory and economic pressures. Ajisafe (2025) critically reviewed the role of community radio in empowering marginalized populations in Nigeria with the objective of examining its contributions to civic engagement, democratic participation and grassroots development.

The study adopted a qualitative literature review, drawing on scholarly publications, policy documents and institutional reports on community broadcasting. The findings revealed that community radio enhances citizens' participation in governance, preserves indigenous cultures and improves access to information, but its effectiveness is constrained by regulatory barriers, inadequate

funding, infrastructural deficiencies and political interference. Although the study is a review rather than primary empirical research, it provides comprehensive insights into the opportunities and challenges facing community broadcasting in Nigeria. The study is relevant to the present article because it highlights how regulatory and political constraints undermine media freedom within Nigeria's broadcasting environment, particularly at the community radio level. Lawal, Babatunde and Olaoye (2025) examined the influence of media ownership on news objectivity in Nigeria with the objective of determining how ownership structures affect editorial independence and audience perception of media credibility. The study adopted a descriptive survey design, collecting data from 400 Nigerian residents through structured questionnaires. Findings revealed that respondents were largely aware of media ownership patterns and perceived ownership interests as capable of influencing news selection, framing and objectivity. Although the study focused on audience perceptions rather than direct experiences of broadcasters, it provides useful empirical evidence on ownership as a structural factor affecting media independence.

The study is relevant to the present article because ownership influence remains a major concern in Nigerian radio broadcasting, where proprietors' interests may shape editorial decisions and limit broadcasters' ability to operate independently. Aluko and Oloyede (2025) examined the impact of media laws and government actions on journalists' safety in Nigeria with the objective of assessing how censorship and regulatory measures affect press freedom and journalistic practice. The study adopted a survey design, collecting data from 21 journalists across print, broadcast and online media, while complementing the survey with policy reviews and documented case studies. The findings revealed that restrictive laws, government surveillance, censorship, media ownership influence and economic pressures have contributed to widespread self-censorship and weakened editorial independence among journalists. Although the study offers a comprehensive assessment by combining empirical data with documentary analysis, its relatively small sample limits the generalizability of its findings. Nevertheless, the study is relevant to the present article because it demonstrates how legal and regulatory frameworks shape media freedom in Nigeria, particularly within the broadcasting sector where radio stations operate under statutory regulation. Andah, Moses and Sunday (2025) examined Nigeria's legal framework for mass media and press freedom with the objective of assessing the extent to which existing constitutional and statutory provisions promote or hinder media independence.

The study adopted a doctrinal legal research approach, analyzing constitutional provisions, media laws, judicial authorities and relevant literature on press freedom in Nigeria. The findings revealed that despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression, journalists continue to experience censorship, harassment and institutional restrictions arising from laws such as the Nigerian Broadcasting Code, the Cybercrimes Act and other regulatory instruments. The authors concluded that the practical implementation of media freedom remains inconsistent and recommended stronger legal protection for journalists and reforms to Nigeria's media regulatory framework. Although the study is largely legal and doctrinal rather than empirical, it is relevant to the present study because it provides a solid legal foundation for understanding the regulatory environment within which Nigerian radio broadcasters exercise media freedom. Adams and Ofordi (2024) investigated the legal and extra-legal challenges confronting journalism practice in Nigeria with the objective of examining how these constraints affect press freedom and the ability of journalists to discharge their professional responsibilities. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a review of legal documents, scholarly literature and media reports with in-depth interviews involving members of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ). The findings revealed that restrictive media laws, political interference, economic hardship, intimidation, self-censorship, safety concerns and editorial pressure continue to undermine media independence and ethical journalism in Nigeria.

The study's strength lies in its integration of documentary evidence with practitioners' experiences, although its interview sample was relatively small. The study is relevant to the present article because it demonstrates that media freedom is constrained by both legal and non-legal factors, many of which directly affect editorial decision-making and professional autonomy in Nigerian radio broadcasting. Gever, Ahmad, Savaşan and Tukur (2024) investigated journalists' knowledge and

utilization of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in Nigeria to determine its effectiveness in promoting access to public information. The study adopted a survey design involving 101 registered journalists in Taraba State selected through cluster and convenience sampling techniques. Findings showed that most journalists were aware of and utilized the FOI Act, but its implementation was constrained by poor compliance from public institutions, limiting access to official information for investigative reporting. Although the study provides useful evidence on the practical application of the FOI Act, its focus on one state restricts broader national generalization. Nevertheless, it is relevant to the present study because access to information is fundamental to media freedom and editorial independence in Nigerian radio broadcasting. Uwalaka and Amadi (2024) investigated Nigerian journalists' perceptions of the motivations behind online harassment and the implications for journalism practice. The study employed a qualitative research design, using semi-structured online and face-to-face interviews with 30 journalists across Nigeria. The findings revealed that journalists attributed online harassment mainly to perceived journalistic misconduct, political polarization and audience hostility, with many respondents indicating that such attacks encouraged self-censorship and negatively affected their professional confidence.

The study recommended stronger legal protection, public sensitization and institutional support to safeguard journalists. Although the study focused specifically on online harassment, it provides valuable evidence on emerging digital threats to media freedom. It is relevant to the present study because online intimidation increasingly influences editorial decisions and professional autonomy among Nigerian radio broadcasters. Aruku, Egere, Eyo and Ochuwa (2024) examined the effects of ownership interference on fairness and objectivity in Nigeria's broadcast industry with the objective of determining how media ownership influences editorial independence. The study adopted a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis and theoretical interrogation of media ownership and broadcasting practice. The findings revealed that interference by government, institutional and private media owners significantly undermines balanced reporting, pluralism and editorial autonomy, often compelling journalists to prioritize owners' interests over the public interest. Although the study is primarily conceptual and lacks primary empirical data, it provides valuable insights into one of the structural constraints on media freedom. The study is relevant to the present article because ownership influence remains a major factor shaping editorial decisions and media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting. Fatonji and Owolabi (2024) investigated the impact of media ownership structures on editorial independence and news reporting in Nigeria's digital era with the objective of determining whether ownership still influences editorial decisions despite the expansion of digital media.

The study adopted a qualitative research design, using interviews with media professionals to obtain insights into newsroom practices and ownership influence. The findings revealed that media proprietors continue to exert considerable influence over editorial content, news selection and framing, thereby limiting journalists' professional autonomy and objectivity. Although the study focused on media organizations generally rather than radio stations specifically, it offers contemporary evidence on the persistence of ownership influence in Nigerian journalism. The study is relevant to the present article because ownership interference remains a critical factor affecting media freedom and editorial independence in Nigerian radio broadcasting. Sanusi, Ojewumi and Taiwo (2024) examined the influence of news commercialization on the ethical responsibilities of broadcast media in Osun State, Nigeria, with the objective of determining how commercial interests affect media independence and professional journalism. The study adopted a quantitative survey design, using structured questionnaires to collect data from 230 journalists, editors, producers and media executives in public and private broadcast stations. The findings revealed that news commercialization significantly compromises editorial independence by encouraging biased reporting, reducing ethical compliance and prioritizing revenue generation over public interest.

Although the study was limited to broadcast organizations in Osun State, it provides strong empirical evidence on the relationship between commercial pressures and media freedom. The study is relevant to the present article because economic and commercial influences remain major constraints to editorial independence in Nigerian radio broadcasting. Eze (2024) examined journalists' knowledge

and use of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in Nigeria with the objective of determining how the law supports access to information and investigative journalism. The study adopted a quantitative survey design, collecting data from Nigerian journalists to assess their awareness, utilisation and challenges in applying the FOI Act. The findings revealed that although many journalists were aware of the Act, practical challenges such as institutional resistance, delayed responses and limited compliance by public officials reduced its effectiveness as a tool for accountability journalism. The study's strength lies in its direct focus on journalists' experiences with information access, although it does not focus specifically on broadcast journalists. It is relevant to the present study because access to information remains a crucial dimension of media freedom and influences the ability of radio broadcasters to perform their watchdog role. Adams and Sharu (2024) examined professionalism in Nigerian radio and television broadcasting with the objective of assessing the extent to which broadcast practitioners adhere to professional standards within a changing media environment. The study adopted a qualitative approach, relying on existing literature and industry observations to examine challenges affecting broadcast professionalism. The findings revealed that Nigerian broadcasting is confronted by challenges including regulatory pressures, inadequate funding, ownership influence, ethical violations and political interference, which collectively affect professional autonomy and content quality. Although the study covers radio and television rather than radio alone, it provides useful insights into structural factors shaping broadcast practice in Nigeria.

The study is relevant to the present article because professionalism and editorial independence are central dimensions of media freedom among radio broadcasters. Mbuba (2018) examined the regulatory role of the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) in the Nigerian broadcast industry, using broadcast media in Anambra State as a case study. The study aimed to assess how broadcasting regulations influence the operations of radio and television stations, particularly in relation to censorship and media freedom. Adopting a documentary research approach, the study analyzed relevant broadcasting laws, NBC regulations and existing literature on media regulation. Findings revealed that while regulation contributes to professionalism and accountability, aspects of regulatory control may also create limitations for broadcasters through restrictions on content and editorial choices. A major strength of the study is its focus on the regulatory environment within Nigeria's broadcast sector, although its reliance on documentary sources limits insights from practicing broadcasters. The study is relevant to the present article because it highlights the tension between regulatory oversight and editorial independence in Nigerian radio broadcasting.

Gap in Literature

Existing studies on media freedom in Nigeria have made significant contributions by examining different dimensions of constraints affecting journalism practice. Previous research has extensively explored issues such as restrictive laws, political interference, censorship, journalist safety, ownership influence, economic pressures and access to information. For instance, Adams and Ofordi (2024) examined legal and extra-legal challenges affecting Nigerian journalists, while Pate and Jibril (2025) focused on the safety challenges confronting journalists operating in conflict environments. Similarly, studies on broadcasting regulation have examined the role of the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission and the relationship between regulatory control and media independence. Despite these contributions, existing literature reveals some important gaps. First, many studies have examined media freedom from a broad journalism perspective, often combining print, broadcast and online media without sufficiently isolating the experiences of radio broadcasters. Although some studies have investigated broadcast media, such as Gainaka, Alsagoff and Ghazali's (2020) study on the watchdog role of Nigerian broadcast media, the specific conditions affecting radio broadcasters' editorial freedom remain insufficiently explored. Second, much of the existing research has concentrated on individual challenges such as regulation, safety or ownership influence—rather than examining how these factors interact to shape media freedom within Nigerian radio broadcasting.

Furthermore, while radio remains one of Nigeria's most accessible and influential communication platforms, limited empirical attention has been given to how radio broadcasters

negotiate political pressure, regulatory expectations, commercial interests and professional responsibilities simultaneously. Recent broadcasting studies have highlighted challenges within public broadcast stations and regulatory environments, but more attention is needed toward understanding the broader question of whether Nigerian radio broadcasters can exercise genuine editorial independence. Therefore, this article contributes to existing scholarship by providing an assessment of the challenges of media freedom specifically within Nigerian radio broadcasting. Rather than focusing on a single constraint, it adopts a broader perspective by analyzing the interconnected political, regulatory, economic, ownership and professional factors that shape the freedom of radio broadcasters to perform their democratic responsibilities. The study consequently fills the gap between general discussions of press freedom and the specific realities of radio broadcasting practice in Nigeria.

2. Theoretical Framework

Social Responsibility Theory of the Press

This study is anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, which provides an appropriate framework for examining media freedom within Nigerian radio broadcasting. The theory emerged from the recommendations of the Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947) as a response to concerns that absolute media freedom without accountability could be harmful to society. Unlike the Libertarian Theory, which emphasizes minimal interference with media operations, the Social Responsibility Theory argues that the media should enjoy freedom while simultaneously fulfilling obligations to society through accurate reporting, fairness, balance, ethical practice and accountability. The theory maintains that the media serve as a social institution with responsibilities beyond profit-making or the interests of media owners. According to McQuail (2019), the Social Responsibility Theory recognizes that media freedom must be accompanied by professional standards that ensure the media provide citizens with truthful information represent diverse viewpoints and contribute to democratic discourse. Thus, freedom of the media is not considered an unrestricted privilege but a social obligation exercised in the public interest. The relevance of this theory to Nigerian radio broadcasting lies in its emphasis on the relationship between freedom, independence and accountability. Radio broadcasters require sufficient editorial autonomy to investigate issues, provide diverse perspectives and serve as watchdogs of society. However, the theory also recognizes the need for ethical regulation to prevent misinformation, abuse of power and irresponsible broadcasting. In Nigeria, where broadcasters operate within regulatory frameworks established by institutions such as the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), the theory provides a useful lens for examining the tension between legitimate regulation and excessive interference that may undermine media freedom.

Furthermore, the Social Responsibility Theory helps explain the challenges facing Nigerian radio broadcasters, including political influence, ownership pressures, economic constraints and self-censorship. While these factors may restrict the ability of broadcasters to operate independently, the theory suggests that genuine media freedom should create a balance between professional autonomy and responsibility to the public. Therefore, the Social Responsibility Theory is suitable for this study because it provides a framework for analyzing whether Nigerian radio broadcasters possess the freedom necessary to perform their democratic roles while maintaining the ethical and professional obligations expected of a responsible media system. It directly connects with the central concern of this article: examining the extent to which media freedom exists within Nigeria's radio broadcasting environment.

3. Research Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary data analysis. The choice of this method is informed by the nature of the study, which seeks to examine existing knowledge on media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting rather than generate primary data from respondents. Secondary research allows the researcher to analyze, interpret and synthesize findings from existing scholarly and institutional materials to develop a broader understanding of the subject.

Data for the study were obtained from relevant secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, book chapters, conference papers, reports from professional and international media organizations, legal documents, and credible publications on media freedom, journalism practice, and broadcasting in Nigeria. The materials reviewed focused on issues relating to press freedom, radio broadcasting, journalist safety, media regulation, ownership influence, editorial independence and democratic communication. The collected materials were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying, organizing and interpreting recurring themes emerging from the reviewed literature.

4. Findings and Implications of Findings

The review of existing literature reveals that media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting remains constrained despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and press freedom. Although Nigeria has witnessed considerable growth in the broadcasting industry following deregulation, the evidence reviewed indicates that radio broadcasters continue to operate within an environment characterized by political interference, regulatory pressures, ownership influence, economic vulnerability and increasing threats to journalists' safety. Studies by Adams and Ofordi (2024), Aluko and Oloyede (2025), and Andah, Moses and Sunday (2025) consistently demonstrate that legal and institutional frameworks intended to regulate broadcasting are sometimes perceived as instruments that restrict editorial independence rather than strengthen professional journalism. This suggests that the existence of constitutional and statutory protections alone does not necessarily guarantee practical media freedom. Another major finding is that media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting is influenced not only by government actions but also by non-state actors. The reviewed studies show that media proprietors, advertisers, political elites and even audience behaviour increasingly shape editorial decisions within radio organizations. For instance, Fatonji and Owolabi (2024) established that ownership interests continue to influence editorial content, while Sanusi, Ojewumi and Taiwo (2024) found that commercial pressures have encouraged news commercialization at the expense of ethical journalism. Similarly, Uwalaka and Amadi (2024) revealed that online harassment has emerged as a contemporary threat capable of encouraging self-censorship among journalists.

These findings indicate that threats to media freedom have become more complex, extending beyond direct government censorship to include economic, technological and organizational pressures. The review further shows that journalist safety has become an indispensable component of media freedom. Pate and Jibril (2025) found that insecurity significantly undermines journalists' ability to report independently, particularly in conflict-prone environments. This finding reinforces UNESCO's (2025) position that journalists cannot effectively perform their democratic responsibilities where safety is compromised. The implication is that protecting journalists from physical attacks, intimidation and digital harassment is not merely a welfare concern but a prerequisite for safeguarding editorial independence and ensuring that citizens receive credible and diverse information. The findings also reveal that radio remains one of the most important platforms for democratic communication in Nigeria because of its extensive reach, affordability and ability to communicate in indigenous languages. However, the democratic potential of radio broadcasting is weakened when broadcasters operate under political, commercial or regulatory pressure. This aligns with Waisbord's (2018) argument that journalism can only fulfill its watchdog function where professional autonomy is protected. Consequently, limitations on editorial independence reduce the capacity of radio broadcasters to facilitate informed public debate, promote transparency and hold public officials accountable.

The findings strongly support the assumptions of the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, which argues that media freedom should coexist with professional responsibility and accountability to society. The theory does not advocate unrestricted media practice; rather, it emphasizes that journalists require sufficient editorial independence to fulfill their obligation of providing accurate, balanced and public-interest-oriented information (McQuail, 2019). The reviewed studies demonstrate that although Nigerian radio broadcasters are expected to discharge these responsibilities, political interference, ownership influence, commercial pressures and regulatory constraints often limit their ability to do so.

Consequently, the problem confronting Nigerian radio broadcasting is not the absence of professional responsibility but the existence of structural conditions that restrict the exercise of responsible journalism.

Overall, the findings suggest that improving media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting requires more than constitutional guarantees or regulatory reforms. It demands institutional commitment to protecting editorial independence, strengthening journalists' safety, promoting transparent regulatory practices and reducing undue political and commercial influence over broadcast operations. Addressing these issues would enhance the capacity of radio broadcasters to fulfill their democratic responsibilities and reinforce the role of broadcasting as a credible platform for public discourse and national development.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Media freedom remains a fundamental requirement for democratic governance, responsible journalism and effective public communication. This article assessed the state and challenges of media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting through a critical review of existing literature and found that, despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression and the expansion of the broadcasting sector, radio broadcasters continue to face significant obstacles that limit editorial independence and professional practice. The review established that political interference, restrictive regulatory practices, ownership influence, economic pressures, insecurity, commercialization of news and emerging forms of digital harassment collectively shape the operational environment of radio broadcasting in Nigeria (Adams & Ofordi, 2024; Pate & Jibril, 2025; Sanusi, Ojewumi, & Taiwo, 2024). The challenge confronting Nigerian radio broadcasting is not simply the existence of regulation but the manner in which political, institutional and commercial interests sometimes influence editorial decisions and restrict journalists' ability to discharge their democratic responsibilities. While regulation is necessary to promote professionalism and ethical broadcasting, it should not undermine editorial autonomy or the constitutional role of the media as a watchdog of society. This position aligns with the assumptions of the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press, which advocates a balance between media freedom and accountability to the public (McQuail, 2019). Finally, this study concludes that strengthening media freedom in Nigerian radio broadcasting requires a supportive legal and institutional environment that guarantees editorial independence, protects journalists from intimidation and violence, encourages ethical journalism and promotes transparent regulatory practices. Only under such conditions can radio broadcasters effectively fulfill their responsibility of informing citizens, facilitating democratic participation and contributing meaningfully to national development.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made: (a) Regulatory authorities should ensure that broadcasting regulations are implemented transparently and impartially. While professional regulation is necessary to uphold ethical broadcasting standards, regulatory measures should not be applied in ways that unnecessarily restrict editorial independence or freedom of expression. (b) Government at all levels should strengthen legal and institutional protection for journalists and media practitioners. Existing constitutional guarantees of press freedom should be complemented with practical measures that prevent intimidation, arbitrary arrests, harassment and attacks against journalists, in line with UNESCO's (2025) advocacy for journalists' safety. (c) Media proprietors should respect editorial independence within their organizations. Owners of radio stations should minimize undue influence over editorial decisions and allow journalists to discharge their professional responsibilities in accordance with established ethical standards and the public interest (McQuail, 2019). (d) Radio broadcasting organizations should strengthen institutional mechanisms that promote ethical journalism and professional development. Regular training on media ethics, investigative reporting, digital security and fact-checking should be provided to enhance journalists' capacity to navigate emerging political, economic and technological challenges. (e) Broadcast media organizations should improve the welfare and safety of journalists. Adequate remuneration, insurance coverage, legal support and safety protocols should be provided, particularly for journalists reporting sensitive issues such as politics, corruption, elections and insecurity, as

recommended by Pate and Jibril (2025). (f) Future researchers should undertake primary empirical studies focusing specifically on media freedom among radio broadcasters in different geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Such studies would provide richer empirical evidence on how political, regulatory; ownership and economic factors influence editorial independence across various broadcasting contexts. These recommendations, if effectively implemented, would contribute to strengthening media freedom, enhancing editorial independence and improving the capacity of Nigerian radio broadcasters to fulfill their democratic responsibility of providing accurate, balanced and credible information to the public.

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