

# INTERROGATING COMPROMISED ROLE OF THE MEDIA AS THE FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM

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## Abstract

This study used descriptive content analysis [DCA] to evaluate the traditional function of the mainstream media as well as its compromised role as the fourth estate of the realm. Secondary data were obtained from the library and the internet. The study was anchored on Media Systems, Watchdog Journalism, Agenda-Setting. The media systems framework explained how the mainstream media operates in Nigeria and how the Nigerian society impacts its operation; Watchdog Journalism guided the researchers to understand that the mainstream media watches over the activities of the three arms of government; Agenda-Setting reveals that by constantly reporting an event and emphasising the salient areas, the mainstream media succeeds in telling the audience what to think about but not how to think about it. Findings revealed that the Nigerian media performs its Fourth Estate role through watchdogging, advocacy, information dissemination, agenda setting, and harmonisation. It was also discovered that the Fourth Estate has equally compromised its role through ownership structure, partisan allegiance and political bias, political and economic ideology, economic reasons, insecurity and safety hazards, and ethical laxity. These factors have combined to make the appellation “Fourth Estate” an assumption, not a reality. The study also found that media role compromise has untold consequences. The researchers recommended that the Nigerian mainstream media should uphold its operational ethics, and perform its role without fear, intimidation, luring benefits, or being the mouthpiece of corrupt politicians against society.

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\*\*Related declarations are provided in the final section of this article.

## Introduction

Despite the plethora of literature on the activities of the Fourth Estate of the Realm, more research and publications on the Fourth Estate are still needed on the operationalisation and conceptualisation of the construct.

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), a Scottish essayist and historian, in his *Heroes and Hero-Worship in History*, wrote that “Burke said that there were three Estates in Parliament, but in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important far than them all” (Gill, 2026, May 11; Cockshut, 2026, February 1). This was the first mention of the term Fourth Estate. What Thomas Carlyle was referring to was the media. He further opined that the Fourth Estate “acted as a sort of watchdog of the constitution and, as such, formed a vital part of democratic government” (Gill, 2026, May 11).

In most countries of the world that practice democracy, the government is basically structured into three arms: legislature, judiciary and executive. In each of these countries, the organs or arms of the government may assume differing structures, compositions, or appellations. However, their roles must have a point of intersection.

In Britain, the Legislature (Parliament) makes laws, grants money, and scrutinizes the government. It consists of the three estates such as Lords Spiritual, Lords Temporal, and Common. The Judiciary, headed by the Supreme Court, interprets and enforces laws as well as ensuring that executive orders are constitutional. The Executive (His Majesty's Government), led by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, runs the country's day-to-day business.

In the United States of America, the legislature (Senate and House of Representatives) is led by the Congress; the judiciary (courts, lawyers, justices, judges) is controlled by the Supreme Court; and, finally, the executive is headed by the President (See U.S. Mission New Zealand, 2022, July 1).

In Nigeria, the legislature is the arm that makes new laws and abrogates obsolete ones. It comprises the Upper House (senate) and the Lower House (House of Representatives). The judiciary interprets the laws made by the legislature. It also upholds the sanctity of the sacrosanct constitution. It comprises the law court, lawyers, the magistrates, and the judges. The executive, on the other hand, is made up of the Chief Executive (e.g. President), his ministers, and police. They oversee the actual enforcement and implementation of laws, policies and daily affairs (Filo, 2025, October 27). It can also formulate policies (Ajibola, 2023, April 21).

What is the significance of the media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm? It implies that, all over the world, the media is the fourth organ of the government. That is, after the three traditional organs of the government - the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive - the media is the fourth. The media, the Fourth Estate of the realm, controls the other three organs of the government. According to Nnah (2019), the Fourth Estate has the “explicit capacity of advocacy and implicit ability to frame political issues”, and enforce democratic principles.

There is a consensus among media researchers (Farrell & James, 2024, January 30; Amodu et al., 2016) that the central role of the media as the Fourth Estate is that of watchdog to the constitution, legislature, judiciary, and the executive. This means that it monitors and criticizes their activities, holds them accountable, and brings their actions under control.

In addition, Pavel (2010) observes that, in democracy, the media is “influencing public opinion, determining the political agenda, providing a link between the government and the people, acting as a government watchdog, and affecting socialization, entertainment, educating the masses, and mobilization as well”.

In his research, Ciboh (2017) discovered “brown envelope” syndrome among Nigerian journalists. He quips that “media professionals prioritize favorable coverage for financial gain, weakening the watchdog role”. In addition, Dauda et al. (2018) observe that “ownership structures play a significant role in determining the Nigerian media's watchdog effectiveness”.

However, concerns have been raised about the extent the media has performed its Fourth Estate role. There are indeed contrastive opinions on the effectiveness & challenges of the mainstream media in democratic government. Many scholars (Eke et al., Agbo & Chukwuma, 2017) admit that, despite challenges, the media has really discharged its duties without fail. Yet, other critics (Eke et al., 2024) have dismissed the media for compromising its role on the ground that “ownership influence and lapdog tendencies compromise the media's watchdog role, leading to biased reporting and reduced public trust”.

In addition to the pros and cons of media activities in democracy, this present study focuses on further interrogation of the compromised role of the Nigerian mainstream media as the Fourth Estate of the realm.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study was to investigate the role of the Nigerian mainstream media as the Fourth Estate of the realm. The specific objectives were to:

- (1). Investigate the activities of the Nigerian media as the Fourth Estate of the realm
- (2). Explore the factors that negatively influence the Nigerian mainstream media leading to its weakness and role compromise as the Fourth Estate
- 3). Discuss the consequences of the media compromising its role.

### **Research Questions**

- 1). How does the Nigerian mainstream media perform its Fourth Estate role?
- 2). What are the factors that negatively influence the Nigerian mainstream media leading to its weakness and role compromise as the Fourth Estate?
- 3). What are the consequences of the media compromising its role?

### **Literature Review**

Many media researchers have conducted critical analyses of the performance of the Nigerian media as the "Fourth Estate," focusing on its role in promoting democracy, accountability, and the challenges of investigating journalism in democracy.

In his *Journalists, Political Sources, and Accountability*, Ciboh (2017) analyses the practical, compromised position of the media as the fourth estate. He elucidates that the relationship between the Nigerian fourth estate and the government is not neutral or independent but one deeply influenced by the pressures of a "hybrid regime". Ciboh (2017) discovers that politicians use both positive incentives (that is, monetary awards) and negative incentives (that is, intimidation and violence) to control the narratives of the fourth estate leading to the compromising of its role.

The researcher argues that this dependence on political sources means that many journalists are not truly performing a watchdog role but rather acting as political puppets and publicity errand boys. Further, Ciboh (2017) opines that the fourth estate is also part of the third estate of the realm for influential politicians. The work of Ciboh (2017) lacks an obvious theoretical framework and a proper systematic methodology. The present study filled these gaps.

In their *Watchdog Journalism and Accountability*, Dauda et al. (2018) focuses on the media's watchdog role as a necessary mechanism for ensuring accountability in Nigeria's democracy. He emphasizes that the media, as the fourth estate, is a crucial stakeholder in the fight against corruption, possessing the power to act as a watchdog through investigative journalism. The qualitative study uses the structuration theory and secondary data to affirm that the Nigerian media, during the period studied, "recorded tremendous achievement in Nigeria political system, particularly toward educating the masses on the government policies and programmes". Their investigation highlights that the media should go beyond simply reporting news to actively investigating and revealing what is unknown to the media users.

Dauda et al. (2018) finds that some media houses allow themselves to be used by the ruling party (APC) as an oppression tool to deprive the opposition parties the right to media access thereby making it impossible for them to use the media to canvas for votes. In addition, there are unethical practices among the media to discriminate over the programmes of political parties thereby endangering the political awareness of the electorate. The researchers identify major challenges as "political interference, corruption, lack of financial resources, and threats to the lives of journalists". These findings are related to some of those findings made in the present study.

However, the criticism against the findings of Dauda et al. (2018), especially on the government's use of the fourth estate as an oppression tool against opposition, does not specify whether it is government or private media. In Nigeria (as in other developing nations), it is known that the government has a higher control over public media than private media. Again, it is easier for the government to manipulate the fourth estate, especially public media, to its advantage (Onwuka & Ifeduba, 2023).

Damissah et al. (2025) examines the multifaceted dynamics of the media as the Fourth Estate, offering a comprehensive analysis of how media independence intersects with democratic accountability in the complex governance environments of the 21st century. Among the findings of the research are the following challenges to the fourth estate: information disorder, misinformation and polarization, market failures and commercial pressures, media independence and democratic accountability in modern governance systems, political interference and state capture.

The works of Ciboh (2017) and Damissah et al. (2025) lack obvious theoretical frameworks and proper systematic methodologies. The present study filled these gaps.

### **Theoretical Review**

**Agenda-Setting:** The agenda setting framework was propounded by Maxwell E. McCombs (1938 –2024) and Donald Lewis Shaw (1936 – 2021). They experimented with the USA presidential election of 1968. The scholars tried to establish a correlation between what the electorate thought was the most important issues surrounding the election and what the local media covered and reported as the most important issues. With the foregoing findings, McCombs and Shaw were able to establish that the media succeeded in telling the electorate what to think about but not how to think (Patrick, 2017).

The assumption is that media focus influences public opinion and perception of issues and life generally. Agenda-setting theory suggests that the mainstream media, through its ability to identify and publicize issues, plays a central role in shaping the issues that attract the attention of the government, international organizations, and public opinion.

**Media Systems:** This theory explains the relationship between the mainstream media as society in which it operates. That is, it elucidates how the mainstream media operates within a society, and how society shapes the mainstream media through its political, economic, and cultural ideologies. Nurgaliyeva (2023) explains that the media system framework “examines the relationship between media content, media institutions, and their audiences and the impact of social forces, such as political and economic factors, on media systems.”

For instance, in liberal model (USA, Britain), the fourth estate is relatively independent, and focuses on information, entertainment, and critique. In Polarized Pluralist countries such as Southern Europe, the fourth estate is tied to politics or political parties, and strong state regulation. In the Democratic Corporatist Model, (e.g. Germany and Scandinavia), there is a mixture of public and private media and strong public service broadcasting.

The digital age throws a big challenge to media systems theory centering on the blurring of traditional boundaries, the inadequacy of classical models to explain modern environments, and the impact of rapid technological changes on political and economic structures.

In summary, the relationship between the Fourth Estate and society is such that the fourth estate reflects and shapes society, politics and culture. On the other hand, it is also influenced by society, politics and culture.

**Watchdog Journalism:** Watchdog journalism goes by alternative names such as investigative journalism/reporting, accountability reporting, accountability or transparency monitoring, and public service journalism.

This framework posits that journalists are guardians of public interest and the critical eye watching and monitoring the three organs of government and politicians, exposing their misconduct and excesses. Watchdog journalism ensures transparency in a democracy by holding politicians accountable. If this role is to be held sacrosanct, then the fear of the media is the beginning of viable democracy and responsible politicians (Gainaka, 2020).

Watchdog journalism, however, is not without defects. The theory has been flawed by ownership interference, economic pressures, and political limitations. Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting (2025, February 1), recorded more challenges to the Watchdog journalism such as the problem of “maintaining confidentiality and the pressure from influential individuals who launched targeted campaigns to suppress the story”.

## **Methodology**

The study used mixed methods: descriptive content analysis and oral interviews. Three theoretical frameworks (agenda-setting, media systems, watchdog journalism) to describe both the function and the compromising role of the mainstream media in Nigeria. Secondary data were obtained from the library and the internet while primary data were sourced by interviewing a few media users in Owerri (Imo) and Nsukka (Anambra).

## **Data Presentation**

**Research Objective 1:** To explore how the Nigerian mainstream media performs its fourth estate role

The following functions have been ascribed to the Fourth Estate:

**Watchdog Role:** The watchdog role is as a result of investigative journalism which portrays journalists as guardians of public interest and the critical eye watching and monitoring the three organs of government and politicians, exposing their misconduct and excesses. It investigates,

criticizes and reports poor and corrupt political leaders to promote effective governance, economic prosperity, and social justice. Watchdog journalism fights abuse of power and ensures transparency in democracy by holding politicians accountable. If Nigerian politicians see the media and its watchdog function as sacrosanct, then they should be wary of the media which in return instills fear and responsibility in them (Gainaka, 2020).

The situation where politicians turn the table during interviews to become the inquisitors rather than the interviewees is a noted, strategic interaction in the media landscape. Politicians use this tactic to divert attention, manage perception, evade accountability, or control the narrative, reversing the traditional roles of the journalist. Having known this scenario, the Nigerian mainstream media as a watchdog should always be prepared to be in charge and in control of the interview process (Abdulkadir, 2023). The case of Rufai Oseni and David Umahi was a typical example.

Rufai Oseni of Arise TV is a Nigerian journalist known for his confrontational and aggressive interview approach. He probes Nigerian politicians on sensitive issues and holds them accountable. His approach has sparked off praise and condemnation at the same time leading to mixed feelings in public opinion. Some people have dismissed Rufai Oseni's approach as adversarial while others see it as necessary journalistic scrutiny and probing.

Ogbonna (2025, October 10) narrates an encounter between Rufai Oseni and David Umahi, Minister for Works. Oseni's aggressive questioning to Umahi included demanding for the cost per kilometer on the "controversial Lagos-Calabar Coastal Highway project, a ₦15 trillion initiative plagued by questions over costs, due diligence, and route adjustments". Umahi's efforts to intimidate and gag Oseni using his political hegemony and membership of the ruling party proved abortive.

**Harmonizing Role:** The Fourth Estate harmonises the functions of the other three estates (legislature, judiciary, and executive). In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, the Fourth Estate brings to the awareness of the populace the activities of the three organs of the government. The media is everywhere the three arms of government are found. For instance, there are journalists reporting from the National Assembly or State House of Assembly, law courts, and the presidency or State House. The Fourth Estate transmits to the citizens the laws made by the legislature, the decisions and judgment of the court on cases, and the policies of the executive. It

is said that the judiciary is the watchdog of the constitution, the legislature, and the executive. If this is true, then the media is the watchdog of the watchdog.

**Information Dissemination:** The Nigerian Fourth Estate provides reliable and timely information to enable the electorate to make active decisions on the political parties and candidates to choose. The information is intended to increase political participation in elections and promote good governance. The Freedom of Information Act widens the information space and bridges the communication gap for free flow of information, ideas, opinions, and cultures.

**Agenda-Setting:** The mainstream media selects and highlights critical societal issues and shapes public discourse, often framing narratives through editorial opinions. Agenda setting also involves repeatedly reporting a given news item to make it salient so that the audience will think along with the media. Agenda setting doctrine states that the more an issue is reported or discussed in the media, the more important society will believe the issue to be. The idea is that the media may not tell people what to think, but it successfully tells them what to think about. For example, in Nigeria, repeated media narratives on Muslim-Muslim ticket, Naira Redesign, Lekki Toll-Gate Massacre, Northern banditry, Biafra secession agitation, etc. were able to change the opinions of the people concerning the issues.

**Advocacy Journalism:** The Fourth Estate is the voice of the voiceless and the marginalized in society. This is the primary responsibility of the Fourth Estate. Any deviation from this principle is inconsistent with the ethical standards of the profession.

A lot of cases exist in Nigeria where the media has spoken for the oppressed, against the oppressor and the oppressive act. For instance, the media has always berated the government for not providing the basic social amenities and jobs for the citizens. Some roads have been constructed or repaired, and the proper things done as a result of media advocacy.

**Research Objective 2:** To reveal the factors that negatively influence the Nigerian mainstream media leading to its weakness and role compromise as the Fourth Estate.

In Nigeria, there are many factors influencing the mainstream media leading to the compromising of its role as the Fourth Estate of the realm. This compromise has brought unfair criticism against the Nigerian media. Some of these factors, among other things, are ownership structure, endemic corruption in the system, misinformation and disinformation, ethical and economic constraints, media capture, government policy, political ideology, undue bias and influence, lack of proper training of personnel, poor equipment, and foreign influence.

## **Compromise Due to Media capture**

This is another form of media control that has emerged in Nigeria where the government authorities and private entities collaborate to exert absolute influence over the Fourth Estate. Jofre (2025, December 28) sees media capture as “different from harsh censorship and state repression ... a particular form of soft and indirect control of news outlets exercised by a variety of possible vested interests, including governments, corporate owners, advertisers, and digital platforms”.

Media capture is the arrest and enslavement of the so-called independent Fourth Estate by powerful individuals, the government or its agency to represent its interest and not that of the public. It therefore comprises elite influence and state control. Media capture undermines media independence and pluralism, often replacing independent journalism with propaganda or pro-government bias. When the media is captured, it defends the government, represents its interest, fails to abide by its professional ethics, and favours the government against public opinion. Media capture can come through regulation, ownership changes, financial control, and editorial pressure.

A captured Fourth Estate compromises its role by favouring the captor - the elite and the government - against the people. There is always a reversal in the surveillance role of the media because the government is in control of the media, not the other way round (Barnehl & Schumacher, 2024). For allowing itself to be captured by the government or the elite, the Fourth Estate has been involved in a prima facie compromise.

**Compromise Due to Ownership Structure:** There are theories of the press that prioritise state or elite ownership of the media. Ownership structure influences media content and shapes the information we consume. In Nigeria, media corporations can be owned and managed by the public (government) and private individuals; and this impacts media contents and editorial decisions in different ways. For instance, the APC’s Muslim-Muslim ticket of the 2023 presidential election received opposing views.

The slant of the editorials in the government-owned newspapers (states and federal) was either neutral or openly supported its policy of Muslim-Muslim ticket. On the other hand, private mainstream media were divided in their stand. The private media owned by individuals who were also members of the ruling party (APC) indirectly supported the Muslim-Muslim ticket permutation. Examples are Daily Sun (owned by Orji Uzor Kanu, former APC governor in Abia

State and current Senator); Blueprint Newspaper (owned by Mohammed Idris Malagi, a senior member of the APC and currently the Minister of Information and National Orientation); The Nation Newspaper (founded by Bola Ahmed Tinubu, APC stalwart and co-founder, and currently the President of Nigeria).

The private media organisations owned by individuals who did not have any affiliation with APC had editorial independence and criticised Muslim-Muslim ticket with repulsion: Vanguard Newspaper (founded by Sam Amuka-Pemu; it frequently serves as a control in studies measuring political bias); The Guardian (owned by Lady Maiden Alex-Ibru); ThisDay Newspaper (Owned by Nduka Obaigbena, with a reputation for intense, sometimes contrarian, reporting on national politics); Daily Trust (Owned by Kabiru Yusuf, often serves the Northern audience); Punch Newspaper (founded by Sam Amuka-Pemu and Gbade Aboderin, with critical posture towards government policies).

From the above cases, we can conclude that the journalists under the government media always compromise their editorial stance more than private media.

### **Compromise Due to Ethical Laxity**

Ethics refers to codes of conduct; that is, how journalists should behave, operate, and conduct themselves. The absence or manipulation of ethical values and principles causes negative compromise. Again, weak enforcement of ethical values by the regulatory bodies includes the lack of the power or will to penalize unethical behaviours of errant journalists. This gives journalists the impetus to normalise practices like collecting bribes to embellish reports, or kill stories that are deemed incriminating, damaging, and revealing.

Nigerian politicians often coerce journalists into compromising their professional ethics by being forced to protect corrupt government officials or suppress stories for the so-called national security reasons.

### **Compromise Due to Insecurity and Safety Hazards**

Journalism in Nigeria is a risky profession. There is insecurity in the media jobs so that the lives of journalists are not safe. Media professionals and their jobs are not protected. There have been cases where journalists were reportedly threatened, physically abused, beaten, abducted, unlawfully arrested, illegally detained, or even murdered. So, to avoid these ugly experiences or

stop their repetition, journalists apply caution by soft-peddalling, avoiding deep investigation, and hiding the truth that may trigger his insecurity.

In his research, Uwalaka (2025, March 24) discovered that “death threats, kidnapping, unlawful detention, torture and assassination are some of the crimes being committed against journalists in Nigeria, according to a recent report. Another recent report details how the police and politicians are responsible for 70% of these harassment cases.

**Compromise Due to Economic Reasons** The impact of financial inducements often lures the Nigerian journalists into negative compromise. Poverty and lack of content push most Nigerian journalists into “brown envelope” journalism in which they collect money or other financial incentives to subvert truth. Politicians and owners of corporations offer small bribes to hungry and corrupt journalists during press conferences to elicit favourable reporting. This act compromises journalistic independence. Imagine a situation where the Nigerian journalists are underpaid or not paid for months. This exposes them to bribes from politicians, business moguls, or criminals looking to influence coverage.

Ebong et al. (2025) rightly confirm that “economic survival pressures intensify the temptation for unethical practices ...” In addition, owing to low financial profits, media houses rely on politicians for support, patronage, and government advertisements. Owners often advise their staff to avoid investigative reporting on corruption within the government. They rather take to eulogistic exaltations and subjectivity instead of balanced criticism and objectivity (Okocha & Ngantem, 2023).

### **Compromise Due to Political and Economic Ideology:**

Mixed economy is a marriage of various ideologies such as capitalism, socialism, communism, etc.

The weakness of mixed ideology in the function of the Fourth Estate arises when contradictory philosophies (e.g. state control versus independent journalism, or political patronage versus commercial independence) intertwine. This compromises the media's role as a neutral watchdog. This conflict is often characterised by political interference, self-censorship, and economic pressures.

In Nigeria, media ownership is a mixture of communist or authoritarian principles and democratic structures. Journalism is therefore frequently censored, and media independence is

limited. Nigerian journalists often face harassment, intimidation, and violence, because they operate within a mixed system that pays lip service to freedom while practicing repression. Some media houses in Nigeria are owned and managed by politicians.

The Sun Newspaper is owned by Orji Uzor Kalu, former Abia governor and current senator representing Abia North. Again, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, current Nigerian President, owns The Nation Newspaper, TVC, Radio Continental, and Adaba FM. This political ownership blends commercial interests with political agendas creating a situation where media organisations operate as propaganda machinery rather than objective sources of information. Nigerian journalists in the media houses owned by politicians do compromise their role by playing as the mouthpiece of the politicians and merely reading or acting according to the scripts from their proprietors or hirers.

### **Compromise Due to Partisan Allegiance and Political Bias**

The independence of the media and freedom of speech as allowed by the constitution is sometimes hampered by ties to dominant political elites, and political parties. The evidence is that media coverage in Nigeria occasionally favours specific party, region, or elite interests. The doctrine of neutrality and non-partisanship holds that media professionals should be apolitical, neutral, and balanced (See Section 39(1) of the 1999 constitution and Section 5 of the NBC Code.

Practicing Members of the Fourth Estate in Nigeria have also researched into and written about the nature of journalistic compromise prevalent in the media space. For instance, Azu Ishiekwene, Editor-in-Chief, Leadership Newspaper, wrote *Writing for Media and Monetising*. Azuh Arinze, Publisher and Editor-in-Chief, Yes International Magazine, authored *My Story of Many Colours*.

**Research Objective 3:** To discuss the consequences of the media's role compromise.

The consequences of the media compromising its role are inexhaustible. Media professionals should bear in mind that their dignity and that of the profession is at stake when they compromise their role. Journalism is an honourable profession and this honour is lost through unethical practices.

Accountability and responsibility will automatically go to the dogs because the media takes sides with corrupt politicians and the elite whose corrupt activities and obnoxious policies it should have countered and exposed.

In addition, the media perpetually keeps society in the dark when truth is killed and buried while falsehood is resurrected through negative compromise. Truth is light while falsehood is darkness. The people need to know exactly what is going on in the polity, what their representatives are doing with the general resources, and the true nature of election process and results, etc.

Media professionals, as the members of the Fourth Estate, should objectively report issues the way they are without injecting their own opinion or embellishing stories to dilute the truth. Half-truth is as bad as falsehood. For example, government-owned media houses, due to vested interest and political affiliations, have not only debunked the truth but have also falsified the figures of casualties and victims of banditry, herders-farmers clashes, secessionist agitations, etc. They do this through purposeful shallow investigation, editorial insufficiency, low coverage, underreporting, overstatement, and understatement (Nwaezeihenatuoha & Ukonu, 2025). When the Fourth Estate misinforms society, it misdirects and misguides it; and when it “disinforms” society, it deforms it.

When the media promotes a candidate or party more often than it does to others, the electorate are bound to make wrong choices concerning the candidate or the party to vote for. In Nigeria, for instance, government media promotes candidates from the ruling party and demotes opposition parties and candidates. Again, politicians who own private media organisations use them to sell themselves and destroy opposition through campaigns of calumny.

Social ills and obnoxious activities increase when the Fourth Estate compromises and fails to advocate for change probably due to the fact that those involved are influential people in society and in the polity. For instance, government media are almost silent over the current hike in fuel price and banditry activities in the north. It is only private media houses that are managing to speak against these anomalies, though with a high rate of trepidation.

Corruption remains endemic in the polity and society because the media refuses to expose the politicians involved in economic mess, financial misappropriation, and electoral improprieties.

## Discussion

In Nigeria, the fourth estate has moved from being a watchdog to a lapdog. Both government and private mainstream media are perpetually under the control of the state. The Nigerian state and politicians control and manipulate the media to their benefit. On some occasions, media personnel allow government representatives and politicians to intimidate them during interviews so that the interviewer becomes the interviewee.

The level of function compromise differs across government and private mainstream media. Many media researchers (Owolabi & Akanni, 2020; Oloyede et al., 2024; Etumnu et al., 2025) agree that the rate of role compromise in government-owned media is higher than what obtains in private mainstream media. This is because the government wields direct control over state media or politically inclined media houses while it controls private media through indirect means. In all, total objectivity (if it truly exists in Nigeria) and accountability are questioned.

Another aspect of the negative compromise among Nigerian journalists is that they usually allow politicians and the elite to control the interview process during questioning. When faced with rigorous, accountability-driven questioning, political figures may attempt to wrest control of the dialogue to avoid answering direct queries. And the Nigerian journalists usually allow them to have their way. The opposite is usually the case with the media or journalists from developed countries. A typical example is the interview between Al-Jazeera's Hasan and Nigeria's Bwala. The former mesmerised Bwala as he refused to be controlled by the Nigerian politician. Maybe, Bwala forgot that he was not facing Nigerian journalists in Nigeria media.

The interview was conducted by Al-Jazeera's Medhi Hasan on the programme "Head to Head" with Daniel Bwala, President Tinubu's adviser on Media and Policy Communication, was a demonstration of *intentional boycott*. The interview was meant to evaluate the performance of the administration of President Bola Tinubu. ThisDay (2026, March 14) exposed the attitude of Daniel Bwala "who is always fond of attacking TV hosts in Nigeria". But on this day, he was "thoroughly humbled and embarrassed by Hasan". So, Hasan's guest (Bwala), trying to dodge his host's prying flummoxing questions, kept using "I didn't say that", "I'm not aware of that". To each of Bwala's denials, Hasan, in a flashback, dug up and replayed the true situations to the chagrin of Bwala.

Bwala's approach represents a prototype of the attitude of all Nigerian politicians towards probing political questioning. Onwuka (2026, March 10) testifies that the programme really

“turned into an embarrassing portrayal of how Nigerian politicians respond to questions, criticism and facts”. To many media users, the interview is painful to watch. In addition, public opinion admits that Bwala's display is a poor media performance.

Another weakness of the fourth estate in Nigeria is that most journalists fail to conduct deep research on issues. This does not only accord them shallow knowledge of the situation at hand but also easily allow their interviewees to turn the table against them during interviews. This is usually in cases of *information asymmetry* where the politicians possess firsthand or better knowledge about the situation in question. This usually leads to power imbalance (See Lightfoot & Wisniewski, 2014)

The doctrine of democratic accountability claimed to have been enforced by the media does not generally represent universal reality. This is because different countries possess differing media theories, media systems, and contexts. For instance, the classical media theories have different views on media role in democratic governance. In the Authoritarian Theory, the media serves the state, not necessarily enforcing accountability.

The Libertarian Theory explains that the media is a watchdog, promoting accountability. With Social Responsibility, the media informs and holds those in power accountable. In Soviet Media Theory, the Media serves the state, prioritizing ideology over accountability. The comparative analysis of media functions and society guides the audience to understand why and how the media works differently across countries.

The findings of many scholars (Dragomir, 2024; Broda & Stromback, 2024; Nweke, 2026) who argue that the media controls power holders is flawed by the same researchers. The question is whether the media controls power holders or that power holders control the media? The true situation in Nigeria is that the mainstream media is less of a watchdog and more of a lapdog. The reason is that politicians usually manipulate the media through state control, power imbalance, brown envelope, incumbency, and ownership.

## **Conclusion**

Using descriptive content analysis, secondary data and three theoretical frameworks (Watchdog Journalism, Media Systems, Agenda-Setting), the study found that the Nigerian media performs its Fourth Estate role through watchdogging, advocacy, information dissemination, and agenda setting, harmonisation.

It was also discovered that the Fourth Estate compromises its role through ownership structure, partisan allegiance and political bias, political and economic ideology, economic reasons, insecurity and safety hazards, and compromise due to ethical laxity. The consequences of the media role compromise were summarised. Finally, by compromising its role, the Fourth Estate of the Realm has already countered its traditional functions.

### **Recommendations**

Finally, the researchers recommended that the Nigerian Fourth Estate should uphold its operational and professional ethics, perform its role without fear, intimidation, luring benefits, or being the mouthpiece of corrupt politicians against society.

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