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# THE ROLE OF THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA AS THE FOURTH ESTATE OF THE REALM IN NIGERIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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**Abstract**

*The media has over the years been viewed through the lens of the fourth estate of the realm but it is limited by several factors, which is why this study was carried out to examine the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm: prospects and challenges. Secondary data was used for the study and the study adopted Libertarian theory of the press as the theoretical framework. Findings from the study revealed that mainstream media is faced with challenges of legal pitfall, ownership and control, intimidation and others while discharging their duties as the fourth estate of the realm. The study also revealed that there abound great prospects and opportunities that can make the mainstream media to improve on its role. The study recommended among others that the government should allow the mainstream media to perform its role without intimidation, arrest and sanctions.*

**Keywords: Role, Mainstream Media, Fourth Estate, Realm, Prospects, Challenges.**

## Introduction

No society in the world can function optimally without the media because the media help to promote order and accountability in the society, because the success of every government depends on how well the citizens are informed about government actions. Before the onslaught of the social media, the mainstream media has served the society in various ways. The Nigerian mainstream media has over the years served different functions in the society; it ranges from information to education, socialization, entertainment, and as the watchdog of the society. The mainstream media includes the traditional media like the radio, television and the newspaper and they are referred as the fourth estate of the realm because of their ability to hold those in power accountable, Akingbohungbe (2025). In a modern constitutional democratic system, the three estates are the three arms of government comprising of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The legislature makes the law, the executive implements the law while the judiciary interprets the law. The media as the fourth estate of the realm is a descriptive term used for the media that was coined by Edmund Burke in the 19th century as the watchdog of the society, Nnah (2019). The role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm in Nigeria cannot be ignored because the mainstream media performing its role here serve a crucial link between the government and the governed.

In performing this function, the mainstream media is faced with different prospects and challenges. The media is often faced with difficult times that they scarcely manage to stay afloat. Other times, they wield strong powers that change policies and bring the government of the day back to the right track. Amodu et al (2014) opined that whatever happens in a democratic setting is largely influenced by the media, this goes to a large extent to show the kind of power the media wields in a democratic government. No matter the time the media finds itself, it main aim is to ensure check and balances in the society.

**Statement of the Problem**

The mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm is tied to the role of promoting transparency and accountability in a democratic system of government. Over the years, the mainstream media has served as the watchdog of the society, safeguarding public interest, but in recent times; this role has come under scrutiny because of evolving political, economic and ever changing technology. In many countries of the world including Nigeria, the mainstream media is faced with different challenges like ownership interference, declining public trust, commercialization of news, sanctions, libel and sedition, defamation and government interference. These factors usually compromise editorial independence and weaken media ability to perform its watchdog function.

Not minding its great and revered importance, there is a growing concern that the mainstream media may no longer have the capacity of holding the powers that be accountable. This ultimately raised a question of the mainstream media's ability of performing this crucial role, the challenges it faces and the prospects of strengthening its role. Therefore this study seeks to examine the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm in Nigeria with a lens on the prospects and challenges it encounter while performing its basic function.

**Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm in Nigeria: prospects and challenges, while the following guides the study as specific objectives. This study therefore aims to:

1. Determine to which extend the mainstream media performed its role as the fourth estate of the realm in Nigeria.
2. Identify major challenges faced by the mainstream media while performing their role as the fourth estate of the realm in Nigeria.
3. Evaluate the prospects and opportunities that can improve the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm in Nigeria.

**Literature Review**

**Concept of Mainstream Media**

Mainstream media is the various traditional forms of media that disseminate information to a large heterogeneous audience. Yildiz, and Tanyildizi, (2024) opined that mainstream media are all types of media that are structured to disseminate information to a significant portion of audience. It includes the radio, television, newspaper and the magazine. For the purpose of this study, these media channels are treated as one, that is the mainstream media.

**Overview of the radio**

**Radio:** radio has influenced communication since its debut, Wulffson (2024) stated that radio is a technology that utilizes electromagnetic waves to transmit and receive electrical signals/impulses. Transmission process of the radio involves modulating sound into radio frequency, broadcasting it through antennas, and demodulating the received waves back into sound. Radio waves are categorized into different frequency ranges to suit specific application. It can be AM or FM frequency. The following according to Samim (2024) are the attributes of radio:

1. **Portability:** radio is very portable that it allows its listeners to tune in from anywhere and can be carried to anywhere. This attribute makes the radio to remain a relevant medium even in today's fast changing world to transmit ideas to the general public.
2. **Cost effectiveness:** radio has remained one of the cheapest mass media medium. Access to is free as listeners can tune in from anywhere as long a radio set is on ground.
3. **Community engagement:** radio stations play vital role in community engagement by providing a platform for local news, political debate and other social discussions. It can become interactive when people phone in to air their views on certain matters.
4. **Ability to penetrate the hinterlands**: this is one the most effective attribute of radio; it has the ability to penetrate into hinterlands where other mass media medium cannot reach. People in inner villages rely on radio to receive information on things happening in a particular society.
5. **Immediate updates**: radio provides real-time news, weather updates and emergency broadcast. This makes it one the most relied source of information among different people even in this ever changing society.

Radio has the ability of watching over the society by reporting events of great importance and taking a stand that can make the government of the day to change its stand on certain issues.

**Overview of television**

Television: according to Abu (2021), this is the system of sending pictures and sounds by electrical signals over a distance so that people can receive them on a television in their homes. The advent of television changed the communication landscape as people can see watch news and other programmes in audio and visual.

The following are the attributes of television:

1. **Intimacy and proximity**: television brings distant worlds and events into the privacy of a home's sitting room thereby creating an atmosphere of intimacy and closeness.
2. Transitory nature: television programmes are usually temporal as it is difficult to record unless there is a retransmission.
3. **Audio/visual medium:** television is known for its ability to use sound and visual at the same time. It makes use of moving footage and graphics to appeal to its audience and this makes it a more desirable medium that other channels.
4. **Immediacy**: television transmits events live and even go the length of covering and transmitting events as they unfold. This is the reason news breaks on the television screen.
5. **Mass medium**: television has the ability to reach a very large and diverse audience simultaneously hereby making it an important medium through which social and political messages are disseminated to a large audience.

Since the television combines audio and visual in information dissemination, the remembers such information easily, that is why television is a huge social, political and educational tool while dealing with the government of the day.

**Overview of Newspaper and Magazine**

Newspaper is a daily or weekly publication focus on timely news and current events printed on low-cut paper for a large audience while a magazine is a weekly, monthly and quarterly publication that focuses on in-depth analysis of events, specific content and usually targets a particular audience or large audience. Magazine according to Kumar (2019) is a periodical that contains a variety of articles as well as instructions, which are more entertaining, promotional and instructive nature. Both are printed materials that carry news and have literate audience. Tanikawa, (2017) stated that newspaper has transcended from just delivery of first-instance reporting to analytical and in-depth news reporting.

**Attributes of a Magazine**

Nwabueze (2024) stated the following as the attributes of magazine:

1. **Glossy cover and inside pages:** magazine is always printed with glossy and colourful covers that increase its aesthetic quality. The glossy pages of the magazine make it attractive when displayed and easily catches the eye of the reader.
2. **Longer interval of publication**: the magazine has a longer interval of publication as compared to newspaper. The magazine is published on daily basis, and this may be because of its ability to appeal to a specific audience.
3. **In-depth news reports:** the magazine presents the news in a more in-depth format because of the publisher's ability of gathering more information on news events before any publication.
4. **Durability**: the magazine lasts longer because of its high and glossy paper quality used in publication.
5. **Longer story deadline:** because magazine takes a longer time to be published, a reporter has a longer time to turn in news stories. This gives the reporter an ample time to dig deep into an event.

**Attributes of a Newspaper**

The newspaper is popularly known for reporting news stories in inverted pyramid form and has the following attributes according to Kumar (2021):

1. **Predominance of News content:** newspaper is usually published to present news to the audience. The news content overshadows every other article contained in the newspaper.
2. **Regular publication:** every newspaper has a fix day of publication, it can daily, weekly, fourth nightly, every newspaper meets up with that particular publication date against all odds.
3. **Literate medium:** newspaper just like magazine is targeted at literate audience. Because it is in printed form, all literate audience can enjoy its content.
4. **Reference material:** due to the fact that newspaper is in printed form, it can last for a long time and can also serve as a reference material in the future.
5. **Low cost:** because newspaper is published using low cost paper, it is relatively cheap compared to magazine and this makes it affordable.

In all, the magazine and the newspaper can be used to champion voices that can amplify the voice of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm.

**Challenges faced by the Mainstream Media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm**

The media is often faced with many difficulties as they perform their role as the fourth estate of the realm. Some of the challenges they encounter as stated by Omula and Ogbole (2024) includes the following:

1. **Ownership and control**: from time immemorial, ownership and press control has been major setbacks the mainstream media face as it performs its function as the fourth estate of the realm. Danso (2025) stated that editorial independence gives the media the ability to perform its function without interference from external pressures. Nigeria's media landscape has mixed media ownership and control and it portrays the saying that he who plays the piper dictates the tune. Government owned media stations are simply the mouth piece of their pay masters but they criticize the opposition. Some important events in Nigeria are not reported sometimes until a foreign media reports it.
2. **Political intimidation**: political intimation is not new in Nigerian media landscape, a lot of journalist have been harassed, jailed and arrested arbitrary by the government when they feel that the media is not on their side. Journalist like Dele Giwa paid the ultimate price in the course of doing his job. It is no wonder that Yahaya (2025) noted that news agendas are often framed not by public interest or civic urgency but by the imperatives of political economy and regime survival. According to Foundation of Investigative Journalism (FIJ) (2025), a reporter known as Ojukwu working with FIJ WAS abducted on the orders of Inspector General of the Police orders and neither his family nor colleagues/friends knew his whereabouts until two days later. Although he was eventually released, but cases like these deter the mainstream media from performing their duties effectively. It is also on record that many events are ignored or under reported to avoid political intimidation media personnel in Nigeria.
3. **Legal issues**: fear of legal issues has been a major challenge among media practitioners, Adam and Ofordi (2024) opined that Nigerian mass media has faced numerous legal and extra legal challenges that impede journalistic freedom. Legal issues like defamation and libel, Official Secret Act that withholds information from reporters. Mainstream media are always on their toes to avoid these legal pitfalls and this poses a very big challenge for them.
4. **Corruption/financial challenges:** mainstream media is always faced with corruption/financial challenges because it relies heavily on advertising for revenue generation. When the mainstream media are properly founded, the journalist working with such media houses will fight it hard to accept bribe or indulge in any form of act of corruption. Adequate provision should be made to fund the mainstream properly and also create other means of getting revenue.
5. **Weak and Compromised Judiciary:** weak and compromised judiciary is becoming alarming in Nigerian media landscape. A lot of Nigerians are losing their confidence in the judiciary and the mainstream media is not left out. It is often said that the court is the last hope of the common man, but with the emerging controversies over compromised judiciary, the common man and the media gradually losing their hope. As aptly put by Omula and Ogbole (2024), a weak and compromised judicial system greatly compounds the problems of the mainstream media as it perform its role as the

fourth estate of the realm. If the mainstream media cannot go to the court to seek redress when offended or wronged, then its job as the fourth estate of the realm is hampered.

**The Prospects/opportunities that can improve the Mainstream Media as the Fourth Estate of the Realm**

The mainstream media is gradually transitioning into a digital media to accommodate a wider audience as the world is fast becoming a global village. Edogor, eat al (2025) stated that the public believe and use information obtained from the mainstream media than information from social media. This shows that the mainstream media in Nigeria has great prospects that need to be harnessed in order to place it on the global radar. The following are the prospects of the mainstream media:

1. **Media convergence:** this is the merging of traditional media with digital technologies that brings about a new form of media that combines content, platforms and audiences. The mainstream media has the prospect of combining both conventional media features with emerging media features to create a digital media that will serve a greater audience. When this happens, there is no difference between traditional media audience and digital media because both are blurred into one and this enables the audience to access a wide range of content on different devices like smart phones and other digital media channels.
2. **High credibility:** the mainstream media still has high credibility because as aptly put by Eke et al (2024), the mainstream media still has a high prospect of credibility because the public depends on it while making important decision in the course of an unfolding event. This mean that the mainstream media can hype on this aspect and continue to have a firm grip on the media audience.
3. **Investigative journalism and advocacy:** the mainstream media has the prospect of using every tool within its disposal to make a mark in investigative journalism and advocacy. Since the mainstream media enjoys credibility among the public, any media advocacy and investigative journalism done by it will enjoy great acceptance. Bankole (2021) opined that investigative journalism adds credibility to the media and every media source needs it to function effectively.
4. **Adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools**: the mainstream media has the prospect of adopting AI tools in news production and dissemination. Adoption of these AI tools makes adoption of AI tools by the mainstream media presents opportunities for improving audience engagement and fostering skill development, Bandara (2025). This shows that adoption of AI by the mainstream media open different doors of opportunities for the media.

**Empirical Review**

In a study done by Nnah (2019) titled The media as the fourth estate of the realm: real or imagined, the study was done to determine whether the fourth estate of the realm is real or imagined. The study was anchored on libertarian theory of the press and findings from the study revealed that the Nigerian media has over the years struggled against suppression, corruption, ownership and control. The study recommended among others that the government and those in authority should fully recognize and comply with the laws stipulated in Section 22 of 1999 constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria.

The difference between the two studies lies in the fact that while the former study is done to determine whether the fourth estate of the realm is real or imagined, while the current study sought to examine the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm with its prospects and challenges. Both studied the media as the fourth estate of the realm, although the current study is limited to mainstream media.

Aja et al (2025) in the Influence of the watchdog role of Nigerian journalists on public perception of President Buhari's ati-corruption crusade examined the influence of journalists' watchdog role on public perception of president Muhammadu Buhari's anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria. Survey research design was used and findings from the study revealed that while there is low a very low level of audience exposure to media reports on corruption cases in Nigeria, the little media hype on President Buhari's anti-corruption efforts has not elicited public support for the anti-corruption crusade. The study also recommended that journalist should be trained in investigative journalism to fulfill their role effectively.

While the study under review is done using primary data, the current study used secondary data. While the Aja et al examined how the influence of the journalist's watchdog role on public perception, the current sought to determine the role of the mainstream media the fourth estate of the realm. Both studied the roles the media in the society and how effective these roles are.

Omula and Ogbole (2024) in Perspectives on the watchdog function of the media in Nigeria sought to find out the challenges to the watchdog function of the media; library research method was used to generate secondary data for the study. Findings from the study revealed that the media cannot effectively perform its watchdog function because power does not reside in the hands of the people and because the media institution is weak and compromised.

The study under review and the current study both used the same research method. Both also studied the media as the watchdog of the society, but while the study under review is focused on challenges to the watchdog function of the media in Nigeria, the current study sought to find the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm with its prospects and challenges.

Eke et al (2024) in the study titled The watchdog role of the media in Nigeria: examining the dynamics of media ownership, lapdog tendencies and news objectivity, was done to assess the watchdog role of the media in Nigeria, with its dynamics of media ownership and lapdog tendencies. The study was hinged on the Agenda Setting theory of the mass media, in-depth interview was used to generate data for the study and the study revealed that media ownership greatly impacts journalistic objectivity and therefore recommended that regulatory bodies should promote diverse media ownership to enhance objectivity and journalistic independence.

While the study under review sought to examine the media's role as the watchdog in Nigeria, the current study sought to examine the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm. While the study under review used primary data for the study, the current study used secondary data. Both studies studied the role of the media as the watchdog of the society although the current study is restricted to mainstream media.

**Theoretical Framework**

The study is hinged on the Libertarian theory which is one of the normative theories of the press which posits that the media should be free from all governmental control. This theory was developed by John Milton, John Locke, John Stuart and Thomas Jefferson in the 16th to 18th century, but was popularized in the 1956 book of the theory of the press and it is based on the ideology that individuals are rational beings and there is a free market of ideas where human beings can discern truth from falsehood.

**Basic tenets of Libertarian theory:**

1. No Censorship: in libertarian theories of the press, the press is free to air their views without censorship. There is no censorship and the people and the press are free to air their views and consume information as they please.
2. Private Ownership of the press: Libertarian theory of the press encourages private ownership of the press and private ownership makes the press to disseminate information without fear of sanctions.
3. Marketplace of ideas: this theory suggests that there is a marketplace of ideas where the good information strives while the wrong one fizzles out. It supports the assumptions that human beings are rational human beings capable of telling truth from falsehood.
4. Watchdog of the society: Libertarian theory of the press portrays the press as the watchdog of the society because they are free to criticize the government whenever it does something wrong. The media here check the government excesses and ensure that the government does the right thing.
5. There is freedom of information and expression: the libertarian theory is founded on the freedom of the expression and access to information. The citizens and the press are free to express themselves without fear.

Louw (1984) opined that the press can serve as the fourth estate of the realm because they can tell the story the way it is and that is what libertarian theory is all about. Linking the theory to the study, the tenets of the libertarian theory gives the mainstream media the room to serve as the fourth estate of the realm by giving the media room to report events objectively thereby serving as checks and balances for the government. This will make the mainstream media to perform its role as the fourth estate of the realm effectively.

**Methodology**

The study adopted the Library Research Method, which means that data used for the study is secondary data. Data from published journal articles, books, news, and textbooks related to the research questions were sourced and used for the study.

**Discussion**

**Objective 1: to which extent did the mainstream media performed its role as the fourth estate of the realm.**

From the data reviewed in the study, the mainstream media has gone to great length to perform its role as the fourth estate of the realm. This it does by reporting news without fear of legal pitfalls and other interference from the authorities, but is seems that this is utopia. Applying the libertarian theory of the press here, the mainstream media operating under the free press atmosphere disseminate information to rational begins who can tell truth from

falsehood. But for this to happen, there should be private ownership of the media and the media landscape should be seen as free market of ideas where the truth triumphs over falsehood. Although the press is trying to do this, but its fourth estate of the realm role is disrupted by so many factors like libel, slander, defamation and even police brutality.

This finding is in line with Omula and Ogbole (2024) which states that mainstream media cannot perform its function effectively because the institution is weak and compromised.

**Objective 2. Identify major challenges faced by the mainstream media while performing its role as the fourth estate of the realm:**

Data gathered for the study showed that the mainstream media is faced with different challenges while performing its role as the fourth estate of the realm with ownership and control on number one on the list, others include legal issues, political intimidation, weak and compromised judiciary. These challenges make difficult for the mainstream media to perform its role as the fourth estate of the realm.

The finding is in line with Eke et al (2024) which revealed that state ownership of the press greatly impacts media objectivity, thereby making the press not to perform their role effectively. The mainstream media is greatly affected by these challenges thereby impeding on its role.

**Objective 3: Evaluate the prospects and opportunities that can improve the role of the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm.**

From the data reviewed, there abound different prospects and opportunities that can improve the mainstream media as the fourth estate of the realm. They include media convergence, high credibility of the mainstream media, adoption of AI tools among others. These prospects and opportunity make the mainstream media to have an edge over the social media.

The finding is in line with Aja et al (2025) which opined that journalist should be trained in investigative journalism to perform their jobs effectively. This points to the fact that when the mainstream media are exposed to different prospects and opportunities, they tend to perform their roles effectively.

**Conclusion**

Mainstream media performing the role of the fourth estate of the realm has generated a lot of arguments, a lot of people argue that the media is a lapdog instead of a watchdog. Although a lot of factors militate against the media in performing their function, but a free and responsible press has a role to play in order to check the government excesses. The mainstream media faced with the onslaught of social media still has great credibility among the audience to the point that people trust and make use of its information during crucial events. This point to the fact that the mainstream media still performs its function as the fourth estate of the realm, though limited by certain factors.

**Recommendations**

In line with the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. The mainstream media should focus on performing its primary function of the fourth estate of the realm objectively within confines of the law without fear of external interference.
2. The government should allow the mainstream media to perform its duties without harassments, arrest and sanctions.
3. The mainstream media should utilize various prospects and opportunities that can make its role easier and effective.

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