



Official Source Dependence and the Failure of Accountability Journalism in Nigeria's Public Affairs Reporting

Usman Adamu Imam^{a*}, Peter Ugondo^a

^aDepartment of Mass Communication, Taraba State University, Jalingo, Taraba State, Nigeria

^aORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1607-005X>

*Corresponding email: usmanadamuimam@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines why Nigerian public affairs journalism depends heavily on official sources and what prevents journalists from producing independent accountability reporting. Three principal theoretical frameworks anchor the study: agenda setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the watchdog theory of journalism, and information subsidy theory (Gandy, 1982). An integrated literature review was adopted as the research design, drawing on peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters. Sources were identified through Google Scholar, Sage Journals and Taylor and Francis databases using the search terms official sources, information subsidies, watchdog journalism, accountability journalism, Nigeria and press freedom. The review was structured across three analytical levels: global, African and Nigerian, to situate the Nigerian problem within its broader scholarly context. The analysis indicates that reliance on official sources in government reporting is a global structural phenomenon shaped by the economics of news production, and that this problem is compounded in African and Nigerian contexts by political incentive systems that discourage independent reporting and by institutional arrangements that sustain source dependence. In Nigeria specifically, five barriers were identified: weak enforcement of the Freedom of Information Act, limited investigative skills, ownership pressure tied to government advertising, threats to journalist safety, and dependence on foreign donor funding. The paper concludes that official source dependence in Nigerian public affairs journalism is a rational economic outcome produced by interlocking structural conditions. Addressing it requires coordinated reform across legal enforcement, media ownership, journalist welfare and investigative training.

Keywords: official sources, accountability journalism, watchdog journalism, Nigeria, information subsidies

Introduction

Public affairs journalism covers government institutions, public policy, elections, civic life and the decisions of those entrusted with public resources (Killenberg, 2008). It differs from political journalism, which centres on electoral competition, and from government journalism, which describes coverage produced by official communications offices. Accountability journalism, a closely related concept, scrutinises the exercise of power and evaluates whether officials have fulfilled their stated obligations. This paper concerns the failure of accountability journalism within public affairs reporting in Nigeria, and specifically with the structural conditions that have produced a journalism that covers government on government's own terms.

Nigerian journalism operates under a specific constitutional mandate. Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution charges the press with upholding the fundamental objectives of state policy, which include accountability and responsive governance. A press that covers only what government chooses to announce cannot fulfil that mandate. Nor can it perform the watchdog function that democratic theory assigns to an independent press. Yet the structural conditions of



Nigerian journalism make official-source dependence not a failure of will but a rational response to economic and political incentives that have remained largely unreformed.

This paper sets out to explain why. Its general objective is to examine the structural conditions sustaining official source dependence in Nigerian public affairs journalism. Three specific research questions guide the inquiry: why does Nigerian journalism rely so heavily on press releases and scheduled events in covering government; what specific barriers prevent journalists from producing independent accountability reporting; and what does the existing literature reveal, across global, African and Nigerian levels, about the structural conditions producing this pattern. The paper proceeds with a review of literature, an integrated methodology, a thematic synthesis and discussion, and a conclusion.

Review of Literature

Global Perspectives on Official Source Dependence

The tendency of journalists to favour official sources is documented across media systems of different political and economic characters, and the explanations offered in the literature vary in emphasis but converge on a common structural logic. Gandy (1982) introduced the concept of the information subsidy to describe how powerful sources reduce the cost of news production by supplying ready-made content. More recent scholarship has extended and complicated this account. Cushion, Lewis and Callaghan (2017), examining data journalism, impartiality and statistical claims in British news, demonstrate the importance of independent journalistic scrutiny in a well-resourced media environment. Their findings provide a comparative context for considering why newsroom resources alone may not guarantee independent scrutiny. This extension matters: it means that improving newsroom resourcing alone will not resolve source dependence if the subsidy system remains intact.

Bennett (1990) developed the indexing perspective to explain how news coverage can be shaped by the range of debate among government officials, adding a political and normative dimension to Gandy's (1982) economic account. Bennett found that journalists calibrate their coverage not just to the cheapest available source but to the range of debate within official circles, treating official consensus as the legitimate boundary of reportable news. Where Gandy (1982) identifies an economic pull toward official sources, Bennett (1990) identifies a professional and political one. The two accounts are not in conflict. They identify two different mechanisms operating simultaneously. Hallin and Mancini (2004), whose comparative framework was developed from Western European and North American media systems, show how media markets, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism and state intervention shape media-system characteristics. These dimensions provide a comparative lens for examining Nigeria, although Nigeria should not be treated as a direct case of their Western typology. The Nigerian evidence reviewed below indicates that political, economic and professional pressures operate together in the Nigerian context.

The African Context: Between Economic Pressure and Cultural Normalisation

The African literature on journalist-source relationships documents the same structural pull identified in global scholarship, but adds dimensions that the Western literature does not adequately anticipate. Wasserman and de Beer (2009) argued that African journalism operates under a dual pressure structure: external pressure from political actors and advertisers shapes coverage decisions, while internal pressure from commercially dependent ownership shapes editorial culture. This dual structure, they argued, compromises the watchdog function before any



individual editorial decision is made. Skjerdal (2018) extends this analysis by examining what happens when economic vulnerability and political pressure are sustained over time. He found that financial inducements to journalists, the brown envelope practice, had in many African newsrooms stopped being experienced as corruption and started being experienced as legitimate informal compensation. The implication is important and differs from what Gandy (1982) and Bennett (1990) suggest: cultural normalisation can sustain source dependence independently of the economic and normative mechanisms that produced it. Reform strategies that address only economics or professional norms will not reach normalised practices.

Musa and Antwi-Boateng (2023) add a contemporary dimension. They argue that the promotional politics environment in Nigeria and across Africa has deepened source dependence qualitatively, not just quantitatively. Government public relations operations now produce content of sufficient quality to compete directly with what under-resourced newsrooms can generate independently. This is a shift from Gandy's (1982) original account, in which official content was merely cheaper. It is now, in many cases, also better packaged. The effect is to make the case for independent reporting harder to sustain editorially, not just economically. Taken together, the African literature suggests that official source dependence in this context has three compounding drivers: economic pressure, cultural normalisation and the professionalisation of government communications. No single intervention addresses all three.

The Nigerian Context: Structural Entrenchment and Democratic Cost

Within Nigeria, the scholarship documents a pattern of official source dependence that is both well-established and, the more recent evidence suggests, worsening rather than improving. Ciboh (2017) provided the most methodologically rigorous account, combining content analysis with in-depth interviews to show that Nigerian politicians manage their relationships with journalists through a dual incentive system. Positive incentives, including money, access and gifts, reward cooperative coverage. Negative incentives, including threats, harassment and access withdrawal, punish scrutiny. This finding goes beyond Gandy (1982) and Bennett (1990) by identifying a third mechanism: active political management of journalist behaviour. Where the global and African literature describes journalists responding rationally to structural conditions, Ciboh (2017) shows that in Nigeria those conditions are actively maintained by political actors with a direct interest in preventing independent reporting.

Eze (2024), examining the use of the Freedom of Information Act among Nigerian journalists, found that journalists faced challenges including the non-integration of the Act's provisions into government-agency operations, an adversarial disposition among government institutions, and a pervasive culture of secrecy. The gap between formal legal entitlement and practical access therefore remains relevant to journalism practice. This finding is important in dialogue with Bennett's (1990) indexing perspective: journalists in Nigeria are not simply choosing official sources as the easiest available option; institutional barriers can make independent access to information difficult.

Nwabueze (2010) showed that the problem has a cultural dimension in Nigeria too, paralleling Skjerdal's (2018) African-level finding. Brown envelope acceptance had become normalised among Nigerian journalists to the point where fewer than half of his respondents believed a salary increase alone would resolve it. This is a significant departure from the purely economic explanations that dominate the global literature. It suggests that the problem in Nigeria, as at the African level, has moved beyond the conditions that produced it and now has a self-



sustaining cultural logic. The Reuters Institute (2025) adds a further structural vulnerability: the investigative journalism that does exist in Nigeria is sustained primarily by international donor funding, meaning that accountability reporting capacity is determined not by Nigerian editorial priorities but by external funding decisions. Reductions in United States development assistance documented by the Reuters Institute (2025) have directly reduced investigative capacity, confirming that the watchdog function in Nigeria is fragile in ways that structural analysis alone does not capture.

Theoretical Framework

Three principal theories provide the analytical scaffolding for this paper. Agenda setting theory was introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972) through their study of media influence during the 1968 United States presidential election. Their foundational claim, that media shape what the public thinks about rather than what it thinks, has been extended across subsequent decades. McCombs (2004) documented its application across more than 400 empirical studies in different national contexts. Applied to Nigerian public affairs journalism, the theory explains the democratic cost of official source dependence precisely: when journalists report primarily what government announces, the public agenda is set by official actors. Issues government wants suppressed simply do not appear. The mechanism of agenda setting, which democratic theory requires the press to exercise independently, is instead exercised by those the press is supposed to scrutinise.

The watchdog theory of journalism, with intellectual roots in Enlightenment political philosophy and operationalised in African contexts by scholars including Ciboh (2017) and Wasserman and de Beer (2009), holds that the press must function as a fourth estate: an independent monitor of the executive, legislature and judiciary on behalf of the public. This role requires independence as its minimum condition. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative framework shows how media markets, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism and state intervention shape the role of media systems. These dimensions help contextualise the institutional conditions within which watchdog journalism operates, but the framework was developed from Western European and North American cases and should therefore be applied cautiously to Nigeria.

Information subsidy theory, developed by Gandy (1982), explains the day-to-day mechanism through which source dependence is reproduced. By reducing the cost of news production, powerful sources make it economically rational for journalists to use approved content rather than invest in independent investigation. Bennett's (1990) indexing perspective extends this by showing that journalists also normatively orient coverage to official consensus. Together, these three theories describe a journalism pulled toward official sources economically, normatively and politically, in a structural arrangement in which source dependence is not aberrant but rational given the conditions in which it operates.

Methodology

This study adopted an integrated literature review as its research design, appropriate for the objective of synthesising and critically analysing existing scholarship on a defined problem rather than generating primary data. The review was conducted by searching Google Scholar, Sage Journals and Taylor and Francis databases using the terms official sources, information subsidies, watchdog journalism, accountability journalism, Nigeria, press freedom, investigative journalism, Africa and journalist-source relationship, covering publications from 1982 to 2025. Sources were



included if they were peer-reviewed journal articles or chapters in edited academic volumes by recognised publishers and directly relevant to one or more research questions; sources based on non-academic publications or lacking verifiable bibliographic details were excluded. Thematic synthesis was applied to organise and critically interpret the literature across global, African and Nigerian levels. The primary limitation is that the review depends on published scholarship; where the literature is thin, as it is on the democratic consequences of source dependence for Nigerian citizens, the analysis can identify but cannot fill the gap.

Thematic Synthesis and Discussion

Why Nigerian Journalism Relies on Official Sources: Competing Explanations and Their Limits

The first research question asked why Nigerian journalism relies so heavily on official sources. The literature provides three explanations that differ in mechanism but converge in outcome. What is analytically valuable is not any one of them in isolation but the way they interact and compound each other in the Nigerian context.

Gandy's (1982) information subsidy account identifies the economic mechanism. Press releases reduce production costs. For Nigerian newsrooms operating under financial pressure, using official content is not a professional lapse but a rational economic response. This explanation is compelling as far as it goes, but it implies that improving newsroom resources would resolve the problem. The evidence does not support this implication. Cushion, Lewis and Callaghan (2017) show that independent scrutiny can remain a concern even within a well-resourced British news environment. This suggests that the economic mechanism is sufficient but not necessary for source dependence to develop, and that addressing it alone will not reverse the pattern.

Bennett's (1990) indexing perspective addresses what Gandy misses: the normative dimension. Nigerian journalists do not only use official sources because they are cheap. They use them because professional socialisation has trained them to treat official consensus as the legitimate boundary of news. This helps explain why the pattern is resistant to skills training alone. A journalist trained in investigative techniques but operating within professional norms that privilege official perspectives will still default to official sources when under pressure. The normative and economic mechanisms reinforce each other, and reform that addresses only one leaves the other intact.

Ciboh's (2017) dual incentive account adds the political mechanism that neither Gandy nor Bennett fully anticipates: official sources in Nigeria actively manage journalist behaviour through both reward and punishment. This is qualitatively different from the structural conditions identified in the global literature. It means that official source dependence in Nigeria is not only the product of rational responses to economic and normative conditions but is also actively produced and maintained by political actors with a direct interest in its continuation. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) polarised pluralist typology helps situate this: Nigeria's media system combines politically entangled ownership with commercial dependence on government advertising, creating structural conditions in which all three mechanisms operate simultaneously and reinforce each other. The promotional politics development documented by Musa and Antwi-Boateng (2023) adds a fourth layer: official content has become professionally competitive, making the case for independent reporting harder to sustain even where the will and skills exist.



Five Barriers to Independent Reporting: A Systemic Reading

The second research question asked what specific barriers prevent journalists from going beyond official sources. Five barriers emerge from the literature. Their significance is not individual but systemic: each reinforces the others in ways that make any single-point intervention insufficient. The economic barrier, identified by Nwabueze (2010) and confirmed by the pattern Gandy (1982) describes, eliminates the financial capacity for independent investigation. When journalists depend on source relationships for supplementary income, as Skjerdal (2018) documented at the African level, the economic barrier and the cultural normalisation barrier become mutually reinforcing. Poor pay makes source payments rational; source payments normalise source relationships; normalised source relationships shape what journalism is understood to require. The cultural barrier, documented by Nwabueze (2010) and Skjerdal (2018), is the most resistant to direct intervention. Normalisation is not simply the persistence of a bad habit. It represents a recalibration of professional identity in which official-source journalism is no longer experienced as a compromise but as the standard. This is the condition that makes the other barriers most difficult to address: journalists who do not experience source dependence as a problem are unlikely to seek or support reforms designed to reduce it.

Cross-Level Analysis: What the Pattern Reveals

The third research question asked what the existing literature reveals, across global, African and Nigerian levels, about the structural conditions sustaining official source dependence. The cross-level analysis produces an argument that no single national study can generate. At the global level, information subsidy theory and indexing theory establish that official source dependence is a rational structural outcome rather than a professional failure. This matters because it means the problem cannot be solved by exhortation, training or ethical codes unless the structural conditions that make dependence rational are changed. At the African level, the normalisation dynamic documented by Skjerdal (2018) and the promotional politics analysis of Musa and Antwi-Boateng (2023) show that the global structural conditions are compounded in ways that produce additional obstacles to reform. Source dependence in Africa has developed cultural and competitive dimensions that pure economic or normative analysis does not capture. At the Nigerian level, the specific combination of Ciboh's (2017) dual incentive system, Eze's (2024) FOI enforcement gap, Nwabueze's (2010) normalisation evidence and the Reuters Institute's (2025) donor dependency finding shows that global structural conditions are amplified by African contextual factors and further specified by Nigerian institutional arrangements into a system in which independent accountability journalism is structurally exceptional rather than professionally normal.

The theoretical frameworks converge on this conclusion from different directions. Agenda setting theory explains what citizens lose when the press follows the official agenda: not just information but the capacity to determine what is worth attending to. The watchdog theory explains what democracy loses: an independent monitoring institution capable of generating the information that elections, legislative oversight and judicial accountability all depend on. Information subsidy theory explains why the arrangement is self-sustaining: it is economically rational for every actor in the system. Bennett's (1990) indexing perspective explains why it is also normatively self-sustaining: professional norms that legitimate official consensus makes the arrangement invisible as a problem. Reform that does not address the economic, political, cultural and normative dimensions simultaneously is unlikely to produce durable change.



Conclusion

This paper examined why Nigerian public affairs journalism depends on official sources and what prevents journalists from producing independent accountability reporting. The analysis applied three theoretical frameworks to an integrated review of global, African and Nigerian scholarship. The central conclusion is that official source dependence in Nigeria is a structural outcome, not a professional failure. Economic conditions make press release dependence rational. Political management of journalist-source relationships makes independent reporting costly. Cultural normalisation has made source-dependent journalism the professional default. And the funding arrangements that sustain whatever investigative capacity exists are externally dependent and therefore fragile. These conditions reinforce each other. Addressing anyone without the others produces limited and temporary results.

The primary limitation is that this is a conceptual paper. No primary data on citizens' reception of or engagement with Nigerian public affairs journalism were collected. The claim that official source dependence damages democratic accountability is theoretically grounded but empirically unverified in the Nigerian citizen context. Addressing this gap should therefore be an important direction for future research. Studies that track how routine official-source coverage translates into specific information deficits for Nigerian citizens, and how those deficits affect political knowledge, civic engagement and accountability expectations, would provide the empirical basis for the structural reform arguments this paper has made.

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AI Use Declaration:

Artificial intelligence tools were used in the preparation of this article. Specifically, Claude (Anthropic) was used to assist with literature organisation, structural drafting and language editing across multiple stages of the writing process. All sources cited in this article were independently verified by the authors. All arguments, interpretations and scholarly judgments in the paper are the authors' own. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity and originality of the work as submitted.
