

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL NEWS FRAMING IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ways in which ownership arrangements influence political news framing in Nigeria's public and private media. The study is guided principally by framing theory and complemented by agenda-setting theory, comparative media systems analysis, and the media-capture perspective. It compares the dominant public broadcaster, the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), with selected private television and newspaper organizations, including Channels Television, Africa Independent Television (AIT), Arise TV, The Punch, The Nation, and Premium Times. The review indicates that ownership is an important, although not exclusive, condition shaping editorial emphasis, source selection, issue salience, and the tone used in political reporting. Public broadcasting tends to privilege official sources and government-centred interpretations, whereas private organizations display greater variation. Some politically connected private outlets reproduce partisan or proprietorial interests, while relatively independent organizations are more likely to perform a watchdog role. The Nigerian pattern is further complicated by commercial pressures, regional and ethnic affiliations, regulatory constraints, and the growing influence of digital platforms. On this basis, the article argues that a simple public-versus-private distinction does not fully explain political framing in Nigeria. A more useful interpretation is a hybrid pattern in which state influence, proprietorial interests, regional identities, and market pressures interact. The article recommends stronger institutional independence for public broadcasting and regulatory agencies, greater transparency in media ownership, expanded media-literacy programmes, and sustainable economic support for professional journalism.

Keywords: Political news framing, media ownership, Nigeria, public broadcasting, private media, framing theory, political parallelism, media capture, democratic governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

News media occupy an important position in democratic political systems because they connect citizens with public institutions, provide information about political actors, and create spaces in which competing claims can be examined. The democratic value of journalism, however, depends not only on whether information is available but also on how events are selected, interpreted, contextualised, and presented to audiences. These processes make media framing a central concern

in political communication. A news report may describe the same policy as an achievement, a failure, a necessary reform, or a threat depending on the elements the journalist or organization chooses to foreground. Consequently, the study of political news must pay attention to the institutional conditions under which news is produced (Abegunde & Fajimbola, 2020).

Nigeria provides a particularly useful setting for examining this relationship. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the country's media environment has expanded through the growth of private broadcasting, newspapers, online journalism, and social media. The expansion has increased the number of voices available to citizens, but plurality of outlets has not automatically produced editorial independence. Political influence, ownership concentration, commercial dependence, regulatory pressure, and regional interests continue to affect the conditions within which journalists work (Adeeko, 2023; Lawal et al., 2025).

The distinction between public and private media is therefore insufficient on its own. A public broadcaster may be constrained by government ownership and appointments, while a private outlet may be influenced by the political interests of its proprietor. At the same time, some private organizations have developed professional reputations for investigative and accountability journalism. The Nigerian media system consequently contains several overlapping tendencies rather than a single uniform pattern.

This article compares these tendencies by examining political news framing in public and private media organizations. The central concern is how institutional ownership, political connections, economic interests, and regional considerations influence the construction of political news. The analysis also considers the regulatory environment and the emergence of digital media as forces that are reshaping the relationship between media organizations and political power.

Three arguments guide the analysis. First, public media, particularly the NTA, are structurally more exposed to government influence and therefore have incentives to foreground official interpretations of political events. Second, private media cannot be treated as a single category because some are closely associated with political proprietors while others attempt to maintain stronger editorial independence. Third, Nigeria's combination of state influence, political ownership, regional identities, and market pressures requires a conceptual approach that goes beyond the standard Western comparative-media categories.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Framing Theory

Framing theory provides the principal analytical lens for the study. Goffman (1974) introduced the idea of frames as interpretive structures through which people organize experience, while Entman (1993) brought the concept into a systematic analysis of media communication. For Entman, framing involves selecting and making particular aspects of reality more noticeable so that audiences are encouraged to understand a problem in a particular way, identify causes, evaluate actors, and consider possible remedies. In practical journalism, framing can occur through story selection, headline construction, quotations, visual emphasis, placement, descriptions of political actors, and the amount of contextual information supplied.

The importance of framing to this study lies in the fact that political reporting is never simply a neutral mirror of events. Editors and reporters work within organizational routines and make decisions about which voices should be included and which aspects of a political event deserve attention. Repeated emphasis can make particular interpretations appear natural or dominant, while the omission of alternative perspectives can reduce their visibility. This does not mean that every

editorial decision is consciously manipulative; rather, institutional routines and constraints can produce patterned forms of emphasis (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Evidence from Nigeria also suggests that ownership can affect framing. Obi et al. (2024), for example, found differences in the treatment of the #EndBadGovernance protest between politically exposed and non-politically exposed news websites. The relevance of this finding to the present analysis is that political and economic relationships may influence which interpretation of a contentious event receives greater prominence.

2.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-setting complements framing theory by drawing attention to issue salience. McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that media influence public attention by determining which issues receive sustained and prominent coverage. Agenda-setting does not require the media to prescribe a specific opinion; repeated attention to an issue can make it more important in the minds of citizens. Priming adds another dimension by suggesting that the issues emphasized in the media may become standards through which political leaders and institutions are evaluated (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

In the Nigerian context, agenda-setting and framing can operate together. A public broadcaster that devotes substantial attention to government programmes may simultaneously make those programmes salient and present them through favourable official narratives. A private outlet that concentrates on corruption or governance failures may make those issues more prominent while encouraging audiences to assess political actors through an accountability frame.

2.3 Comparative Media Systems

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) comparative media systems framework offers a useful starting point for analysing the relationship between media and political institutions. The framework considers state intervention, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and market development, and uses these dimensions to distinguish different media-system models. Nigeria, however, does not fit comfortably into any one ideal type. The country's media environment combines strong state involvement with a substantial commercial sector, varying levels of professionalization, and strong political and regional connections.

Yushau (2010) describes the Nigerian pattern in terms of regional parallelism, emphasizing the importance of geography, ethnic affiliations, elite networks, and the location of media ownership. This idea is particularly useful because political communication in Nigeria is often interpreted through regional and identity-based relationships as well as formal party competition. Adeeko (2023) likewise identifies substantial state intervention and political parallelism within the Nigerian media system.

2.4 Propaganda Model and Media Capture

The propaganda model developed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) provides another perspective by directing attention to the structural filters through which news passes. Ownership, advertising, sourcing, criticism or pressure, and ideological assumptions can influence what becomes news and how it is presented. Although developed in a different political and economic setting, the model is useful for considering how powerful interests may affect editorial priorities.

The related concept of media capture is especially relevant to Nigeria. Media capture occurs when political or economic interests acquire sufficient influence over media institutions to affect editorial decisions. Such influence may arise through direct ownership, political appointments, advertising

dependence, regulatory pressure, or informal relationships between media proprietors and political elites (Lawal et al., 2025). The concern is not merely that an owner may express a preference, but that organizational structures may systematically narrow the range of perspectives that journalists can safely or practically publish.

2.5 Analytical Synthesis

The present article therefore brings the four perspectives together. The proposed analytical position is that political news framing in Nigeria is shaped by the interaction of ownership, political and regional affiliations, and economic conditions. Ownership establishes the institutional environment; political and regional relationships influence the interests that receive attention; and economic pressures affect the degree of editorial autonomy available to journalists. The interaction of these factors produces different framing patterns in public and private media.

3. Historical and Institutional Context

3.1 Evolution of Nigerian Media

The Nigerian press has a long history of political engagement. During the colonial period, newspapers such as the West African Pilot and the Nigerian Tribune contributed to nationalist mobilisation and political debate (Olorunyomi, 2026). The relationship between journalism and political power subsequently passed through periods of openness and repression. Military governments frequently restricted press freedom through censorship, closures, arrests, and restrictive decrees.

The transition to civilian government in 1999 created new opportunities for media development. Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution recognizes freedom of expression and the press, while the expansion of broadcasting created space for private television and radio. Channels Television, AIT, and later Arise TV became important components of the private broadcast sector. Newspapers and digital-native outlets also expanded the range of political information available to citizens.

Nevertheless, the institutional expansion of the media has been accompanied by continuing struggles over ownership, regulation, professional independence, and financial sustainability. The result is a media environment in which formal plurality exists alongside significant structural constraints.

3.2 Public Media: The Nigerian Television Authority

The Nigerian Television Authority is the most prominent public broadcaster in the country. Established in 1977 through the consolidation of regional television services, it operates a national network and is publicly owned. Its statutory role includes public-interest broadcasting, education, information, and entertainment. In practice, however, its dependence on government funding and political appointments creates opportunities for executive influence (Akpan, 2026).

Leadership appointments illustrate this structural vulnerability. The reversal of NTA appointments reported in September 2025 demonstrated the extent to which executive decisions can affect the management of the public broadcaster (Daily Trust, 2025). Such institutional dependence matters for news framing because senior management has influence over editorial priorities and organizational culture.

Available evidence also points to differences between NTA and major private broadcasters in the treatment of political issues. Research presented at the Federal Polytechnic Ilaro conference reported that NTA bulletins relied heavily on government sources and often lacked broader social

context (Conference 2025, 2025). Similarly, a comparative study of NTA and AIT coverage of election violence identified differences in the attribution of responsibility, with NTA less likely to associate violence with ruling-party or state-security actors (KiJHuS, 2024).

3.3 Private Media Landscape

Nigeria's private media sector is more heterogeneous than the public sector. Channels Television, AIT, Arise TV, The Punch, The Nation, ThisDay, The Guardian, Vanguard, and Premium Times represent different ownership structures, editorial traditions, and commercial strategies. This diversity makes it inappropriate to assume that all private organizations provide the same type of political framing.

One major concern is political ownership. When politicians or politically connected business figures have substantial interests in media organizations, editorial independence can become difficult to maintain. Bala (2025) argues that political proprietors may encourage coverage that highlights the achievements of allies while minimizing allegations or failures involving themselves or their political associates.

Private media are also subject to market pressures. Newsrooms must generate revenue, attract audiences, retain advertisers, and compete with digital platforms. These pressures can encourage sensationalism, speed over verification, and editorial choices designed to maximize attention. At the same time, some private organizations have built professional reputations through investigative reporting and critical political coverage.

3.4 Regulatory Environment

Broadcasting in Nigeria is regulated principally through the National Broadcasting Commission and the Nigeria Broadcasting Code. The NBC is responsible for licensing, monitoring, and enforcing broadcasting standards. However, the scope of regulatory authority has increasingly become contested in legal and public debates.

A Federal High Court decision reported in November 2024 challenged the NBC's authority to impose certain sanctions on broadcasters, while a further ruling in May 2026 reportedly restrained the Commission from using its formal notices to threaten or penalize broadcasters over certain expressions of opinion (SERAP & NGE, 2026). These developments illustrate the tension between regulatory oversight and constitutional protections for expression and press freedom.

Regulatory uncertainty can affect framing indirectly. When media organizations perceive that licences, sanctions, or other regulatory consequences may follow controversial reporting, editors may become more cautious. Thus, regulation may influence not only whether a story is published but also the tone, sourcing, and prominence given to politically sensitive information.

4. COMPARATIVE FINDINGS

4.1 Public Media: State-Centred Framing

The evidence reviewed in this article indicates that public media tend to display a state-centred pattern of political framing. Government officials are frequently treated as primary sources, official programmes receive substantial attention, and political events are often interpreted from the perspective of government institutions. This pattern is consistent with the institutional dependence of public broadcasting on state financing and political appointments.

State-centred framing can occur through several mechanisms. Selection operates when stories favourable to government priorities receive greater attention. Attribution occurs when official

sources dominate the explanation of events. Placement and prominence become framing devices when favourable reports occupy lead positions or prime-time slots. Language also matters: positive descriptions of government actions can create a legitimacy frame, while opposition activities may receive more critical or less contextual treatment.

The significance of these practices extends beyond individual stories. Repeated exposure to government-centred narratives can create an information environment in which official interpretations appear more authoritative than competing accounts. Where alternative voices are consistently less visible, citizens may have fewer opportunities to compare explanations of public events.

4.2 Private Media: Partisan-Commercial and Watchdog Patterns

Private media display a more differentiated pattern. The first is partisan-commercial framing, which occurs where political ownership, proprietorial interests, or strong political affiliations influence editorial direction. Such outlets may give extensive coverage to preferred political actors while devoting less attention to allegations involving their allies. Bala (2025) describes this as a serious challenge because journalists may practice self-censorship to protect their employment.

The second pattern is critical-watchdog framing. Some private organizations devote significant resources to investigative reporting, accountability journalism, and the scrutiny of powerful institutions. Channels Television and Premium Times are frequently associated with this orientation, while The Punch and The Guardian have established traditions of independent journalism.

Watchdog journalism, however, operates under substantial constraints. Rising production costs, competition for advertising, and the migration of digital advertising revenue to large global platforms weaken the financial base of local journalism (Nigerian Press Organisation, 2026). Political pressure also remains a concern. The reported 2025 dispute involving the DSS and AIT and Channels Television illustrates how critical broadcasters can face pressure when their reports challenge powerful institutions (SERAP & Amnesty International, 2025).

4.3 Regional and Ethnic Framing

Ownership type does not fully explain Nigerian political framing. Regional and ethnic considerations can influence the selection and interpretation of political issues across both public and private organizations. Yushau's (2010) concept of regional parallelism is useful here because it draws attention to the role of geographical location, elite networks, and regional interests in determining media orientation.

The regional dimension becomes particularly visible in reporting on elections, security, communal conflict, and identity politics. Media organizations located in different parts of the country may interpret the same event through different political and social experiences. During the 2023 elections, for example, identity-based narratives circulated widely and contributed to an already polarized political environment (Frontiersin, 2023).

Conflict reporting demonstrates the potential consequences. A PRNigeria review of coverage following violence in Plateau State found substantial negative and sensational treatment, including extensive emphasis on bloodshed (PRNigeria, 2025). When reports emphasize ethnic identity without sufficient attention to structural and political causes, they may deepen social divisions rather than contribute to public understanding.

4.4 Digital and Social Media Framing

Digital media have altered the relationship between professional journalism and political communication. Platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram allow citizens, politicians, activists, and journalists to circulate information without relying exclusively on traditional gatekeepers. This has widened participation in political communication and enabled citizens to challenge dominant narratives.

The democratic possibilities of digital media coexist with significant risks. Social platforms can accelerate misinformation, emotional mobilisation, polarization, and identity-based antagonism (Sarki, 2026). Because content can spread rapidly before verification, digital frames may be more emotionally intense than those found in professionally edited newsrooms.

The relationship between traditional and social media is increasingly reciprocal. Traditional organizations monitor social platforms for emerging stories and public reactions, while social-media users redistribute and reinterpret professionally produced news. This hybrid environment means that political framing is no longer controlled entirely by established media institutions.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Three Broad Framing Regimes

The comparative evidence supports the identification of three broad regimes. The first is state-centred legitimization, most visible in public broadcasting. Its defining features are official-source dominance, favourable attention to government activities, limited critical context, and institutional dependence on political authorities.

The second is partisan-commercial framing, found in private organizations with strong political or proprietary interests. Here, political news may be used to advance the interests of owners, allies, parties, or regional constituencies. Self-censorship, selective coverage, and editorial direction can limit the range of perspectives presented to audiences.

The third is critical-watchdog framing, associated with organizations that attempt to maintain editorial independence and investigate powerful actors. This model is central to the democratic role of journalism, but it is also the most exposed to financial pressure, political intimidation, and competition from digital platforms.

5.2 Towards a Hybrid-Political Parallelism Perspective

The Nigerian case suggests that existing comparative media categories require contextual adjustment. Hallin and Mancini's (2004) framework remains valuable, but the Nigerian environment combines features that are not easily captured by a single model. Government control of broadcasting exists alongside private ownership; political affiliation overlaps with regional identity; and commercial pressures coexist with patron-client relationships.

This article therefore uses the term hybrid-political parallelism to describe a system in which state influence, political proprietorship, regional identity, and market forces interact. The concept builds on the regional-parallelism argument associated with Yushau (2010) while incorporating the contemporary problem of media capture. Its purpose is not to create a rigid classification but to provide a context-sensitive way of understanding why political framing differs across Nigerian media organizations.

The framework has wider relevance for media research in post-colonial and multi-ethnic democracies. Where state institutions remain influential, political patronage is significant,

ownership is concentrated, and regional identities shape public life, media systems may operate differently from the liberal-market systems that dominate much comparative scholarship.

5.3 Implications for Democratic Governance

The quality of political framing has direct consequences for democratic accountability. Citizens depend on news organizations to obtain information about government performance, policy alternatives, electoral competition, and public controversies. When ownership interests systematically determine which facts are emphasized or ignored, citizens may struggle to distinguish public-interest information from partisan communication.

State-centred framing can reduce accountability by shielding incumbents from sustained scrutiny. Partisan-commercial framing can fragment the public sphere by placing citizens in competing information environments. Regional and ethnic framing can intensify identity divisions, while unverified digital narratives can increase distrust and polarization. Taken together, these pressures weaken the capacity of the media to serve as a shared forum for democratic deliberation.

The electoral consequences are especially important. If ruling parties receive greater visibility or more favourable coverage, opposition candidates may face unequal opportunities to communicate with voters. Amupitan (2026) similarly drew attention to the effects of incumbency and unequal access to political coverage. A credible democratic media system therefore requires not only freedom from direct censorship but also institutional conditions that support balanced and professionally produced political information.

5.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article is primarily a comparative review based on secondary materials and existing research. It does not present a new quantitative content analysis of political news items. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as an analytical synthesis rather than as statistical proof of the frequency of particular frames.

Future studies should combine quantitative content analysis with qualitative examination of newsroom routines and interviews with editors and journalists. A longitudinal design covering election and non-election periods would also help determine whether framing patterns change according to political context. Audience research is equally important because citizens do not necessarily accept media frames in the way intended by producers. Future work should also compare television, newspapers, radio, and digital-native outlets across different Nigerian regions.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The comparative analysis demonstrates that political news framing in Nigeria is closely connected to the institutional and economic conditions under which journalism is produced. Public media, particularly the NTA, operate within a structure that exposes them to government influence and encourages state-centred political narratives. Private media are more diverse: some reproduce the interests of politically connected proprietors, while others maintain stronger watchdog traditions.

The study also shows that the public-private distinction must be supplemented by attention to regional identity, political networks, commercial pressures, regulatory conditions, and digital transformation. These factors interact to create a hybrid media environment in which no single explanation adequately accounts for political framing across all organizations.

First, Nigeria should strengthen the institutional independence of public broadcasting. The NTA would be better positioned to serve the public interest if its governance, funding, and senior

appointments were protected from direct partisan influence. A transparent and cross-partisan appointment process would improve public confidence.

Second, regulatory institutions should operate with clear legal mandates and appropriate safeguards for press freedom. The objective should be professional compliance rather than political control. Recent judicial disputes concerning NBC sanctions demonstrate the need for a clearer balance between regulatory authority and constitutional rights.

Third, media ownership should be more transparent. Audiences should be able to identify beneficial owners and significant political affiliations so that they can assess possible conflicts of interest. Disclosure mechanisms would not eliminate bias, but they would make the information environment more transparent.

Fourth, media-literacy programmes should be expanded in schools, universities, and communities. Citizens need practical skills for identifying framing techniques, checking sources, distinguishing evidence from opinion, and recognizing political or commercial interests behind media content (Lawal et al., 2025).

Fifth, sustainable financing for independent journalism should be encouraged. Journalism foundations, transparent public-interest funding, tax incentives, subscription models, and fair approaches to digital advertising could help reduce excessive dependence on politically connected advertisers.

Finally, professional associations should reinforce ethical journalism, verification, balance, and accountability. The future of democratic communication in Nigeria depends on whether media organizations can maintain credibility while operating within a difficult political and economic environment.

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