Whose News? Media Capture, Ownership Structures, and the Crisis of Journalistic Independence in Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined the interplay between media ownership structures, political influence, and journalistic independence in Nigeria, using the reportage of the 2022 presidential primaries of the All Progressives Congress (APC) as a case in point. Employing qualitative content analysis of nine media outlets and twelve key-informant interviews with politicians and senior journalists, the study identifies systematic patterns of ownership-based bias, editorial interference, and professional compromise. Findings reveal that media owners often with vested political interests exert considerable influence on the frequency, tone, and slant of coverage, particularly in high-stakes political reporting. While state-controlled media displayed a slight bias in favour of incumbents, privately owned media outlets overtly promoted the political interests of their proprietors. Senior journalists reported facing pressure to align with partisan agendas, thereby undermining editorial independence and journalistic ethics. Drawing on Media Capture Theory and the Hierarchy of Influences Model, the research proposes a multidimensional framework for analysing the extent to which political journalism in emerging democracies is compromised by elite influence. It contributes to the literature by extending the theory of media capture to the Nigerian context and by exposing structural constraints on journalistic autonomy. The study concludes that Nigeria's media landscape remains vulnerable to elite capture and calls for structural reforms, including transparent ownership regulation, independent public broadcasting, and enhanced media literacy. These measures are essential for safeguarding democracy and restoring professional journalism.

Keywords: Media Ownership, Journalistic Independence, Political Communication, Media Capture, Political power

Introduction

The Nigerian media have historically served as instruments of propaganda for their proprietors, regardless of their ideological leanings. From *Iwe Iroyin*, established in 1859 by British missionary Rev. Henry Townsend, through the colonial period, the press essentially functioned as a vehicle for evangelism, colonial administration, and nationalist agitation led by figures such as Herbert Macaulay, Obafemi Awolowo, and Nnamdi Azikiwe. In the post-independence era, the Federal Government's creation of *The Morning Post* and its 60% acquisition of *The Daily Times* reinforced a top-down flow of information designed more for elite control than for public enlightenment (Ciboh, 2007).

This pattern has persisted. Media ownership in Nigeria, whether public or private, has consistently mirrored the principle that "he who pays the piper calls the tune." As Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue, media systems reflect the broader social and political structures in which they operate. Likewise, Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's *Four Theories of the Press* affirm that economic and political forces mediate the relationship between the media and the state. Within such systems, the media frequently serve as dependent variables, reproducing dominant power relations rather than challenging them.

Many media scholars link capital concentration in the media industry to compromised journalistic independence. Humphrecht (2019), Luqiu (2017), and Dunaway (2013) show how both direct and indirect ownership can distort editorial judgment to favour elite interests. In Nigeria, state-owned media often prioritise political loyalty over professional competence, while private proprietors maintain political affiliations that are essential for securing contracts, licences, and regulatory advantages. Consequently, media ownership often serves as a tool for political bargaining, shaping public opinion, enhancing visibility, and safeguarding economic interests. These dynamics are not exclusive to Nigeria. In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi famously leveraged his media holdings to gain an electoral advantage. Similar patterns have emerged in the UK and Germany, where conglomerates such as Axel Springer and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation have faced criticism for shaping political discourse (Hamilton, 2004). Even in the United States, increasing partisanship has been traced to ownership interests. In more authoritarian settings, such as China and Hong Kong, Luqiu (2017) documents the state's use of financial and regulatory instruments to suppress dissent and manipulate narratives.

In Nigeria, the entanglement between media ownership and political power is both historical and structural. Udoakah (2014) observes that media expansion was driven by political ambition, with ownership concentrated among elite actors. Oso (2012) notes that partisan alignment with political figures has become a defining feature of the Nigerian media system. Examples include Raymond Dokpesi's AIT and Ray Power (PDP), MKO Abiola's *Concord* (SDP), Orji Uzor Kalu's *Daily Sun*, Sam Nda-Isaiah's *Leadership*, Bola Tinubu's *TVC* and *The Nation*, Dele Momodu's *Ovation*, and Omoyele Sowore's *Sahara Reporters*. These outlets function not merely as news platforms but as political instruments shaped by proprietorial ideology.

While existing studies (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2018; Apuke, 2016a; Ukonu, 2005) have explored the roles of media in democratic transitions and elections, most remain descriptive, focusing on historical or campaign-period reporting. Few have critically engaged with the structural mechanics of media ownership through the lens of media capture theory. As articulated by Schiffrin (2017) and Dragomir (2020), this theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how elites utilise media institutions for political and economic gain. Moreover, media research has given little focus on the effects of media ownership on editorial freedom and journalistic standards when it comes to high-stakes situations such as presidential primaries. Against this backdrop, this study examines how the ownership structure and political affiliations aid media capture in Nigeria and evaluates the consequent impact on democratic debate and journalistic integrity. As key transmitters of social and political messages, critically assessing the structural integrity of the media, especially in their manipulation by the elites, is crucial to maintain professional journalism and democratic accountability.

Objectives of the Study

Generally, the study focuses on critically examining how media ownership facilitates the consolidation of political power and impacts journalistic integrity during the 2022 APC presidential primary in Nigeria. But specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine how different ownership structures shaped the tone, frequency, and framing of political coverage during the APC 2022 presidential primary.
2. Compare editorial treatment of key presidential aspirants across government-owned and privately owned media outlets.
3. Evaluate journalists' and editors' perceptions of political pressure, ownership interference, and professional compromise during the event.
4. Assess whether patterns observed during the APC primary reflect broader structural trends of media capture and partisanship in Nigerian journalism.
5. Determine practical strategies for mitigating ownership-driven bias and safeguarding editorial independence during high-stakes political reporting.

Literature Review

Historical and Legal Instruments of Media Control

The regulation of media as a tool for political control has a long and global history. In the United States, despite the First Amendment's guarantee of press freedom, the Sedition Act of 1798, passed under President John Adams, sought to restrict the critical press, highlighting the tensions between state power and journalistic autonomy (McGuire, 2006). Subsequent laws, including the Espionage Act of 1917, Sedition Act of 1918, Communications Act of 1934, and the Telecommunications Act of 1996, illustrate the persistence of state efforts to curtail press freedom, particularly during periods of perceived national crisis.

In Nigeria, the colonial and post-independence governments deployed a litany of legal instruments to suppress dissenting media. The 1903 Newspaper Ordinance criminalised the publication of material deemed contrary to public interest. After independence, legal frameworks such as the Newspaper Defamation Act (1961), the Official Secrets Act (1962), and a series of decrees during the military era including Decree No. 4 of 1984 and Decree No. 43 of 1993 functioned to intimidate the press and limit its watchdog role (Udoakah, 2014). These repressive measures underscore the historical role of the law in enabling media capture.

Beyond legal repression, state agencies have used regulatory licensing to consolidate control. Statutory bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) have been established to monitor, sanction, and, in some cases, arbitrarily shut down media houses. Notably, the NBC's sealing of African Independent Television (AIT) in 2005 and licence withdrawal in 2006 for airing politically sensitive content reflects the weaponisation of licensing powers to stifle critical voices (Ukonu, 2005).

Ownership Structures and the Political Economy of Media Control

Ownership of media outlets whether state-run or privately held remains one of the most consequential determinants of editorial autonomy. In the Nigerian context, Udoakah (2014) estimates that over half of working journalists are employed in state-owned media institutions, where bureaucratic structures and political patronage often mirror those of the civil service. This institutional alignment renders the press especially susceptible to clientelism and state control. Moreover, economic dependencies through advertising revenue, taxation, and regulatory licensing further consolidate this vulnerability. Apuke (2016b) offers a helpful typology of Nigerian media ownership, distinguishing four models: government, private, mixed, and community-based outlets.

His study reveals that across all ownership categories, proprietorial influence often overrides professional and ethical considerations. Usually, the media managers exist in a precarious situation between editorial principles and the pressure of politically influential owners. However, Apuke raises this as a diagnostic of a structural dilemma in the estate of editorial leadership. Still, he did not go to the extent of describing implementable legislations for insulating journalism from proprietorship intrusion.

The occurrence of ownership-induced constraints on editorial freedom, as witnessed in Nigeria, is not an exception in other parts of the world. Comparative literature always proves that there is a relationship between ownership structure and political bias in news presentation. As an example, the ACE Electoral Knowledge Network (2022) highlights how both state-owned and privately owned media houses in various political regimes prefer the agenda of the incumbents or owners who are politically connected, especially before, during, and after election campaigns. Whereas some nations, such as the United States and Finland, permit political advertising—thereby perpetuating market-related inequality in the media others, like the United Kingdom and Denmark, ban all political advertising completely, which reflects differing normative assumptions regarding the interplay of media ownership and media accountability.

The most crucial aspect of these global patterns, however, is that they point to a common lingering problem involving the tendency of media ownership in the hands of so few as to have ideological resemblance, agenda-setting, and loss of media plurality. Harcourt and Picard (2009) believe that the ownership policy of the media is not merely an issue of regulation but a means to attaining a larger democratic purpose, which includes transparency, pluralism, and professional autonomy. The Berlusconi case in Italy and Dassault in France are prime examples of how political owners may use press platforms to serve political ends, with cross-pollination between journalism and propaganda. Their discussion highlights the necessity of ownership regulation, which is focused on institutional independence and serving the common good, more than empowering democracy and addressing the public interest especially in hybrid societies where media capture is legal and systematic.

Comparing Nigerian and international experience, it can be argued that foreign ownership structures, when not thoroughly checked, are an essential entry point of elite influence. Such political, economic, and regulatory domination undermines the watchdog role of the media and strengthens epistemic asymmetries as part of democratic dialogue. Consequently, the reforms needed to tackle media capture need to be not only context-specific but also normatively reconstitutive of the role of ownership as the basis of public trust and democratic authority.

Media Capture, Political Power Play, and Journalistic Integrity

The historical and systematic interpenetration of media and political powers has been seen in the Nigerian context since the times of colonialism. When the media was an instrument of nationalist agitation, editorial policy was shaped by ownership many times. According to Ciboh (2007) and Akinfeleye (2003), other leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo set up media houses as the primary means of disseminating their political ideologies. As examples, the founding in 1959 of Western Nigerian Television (WNTV) was simply due to the inability of Awolowo to access federal radio broadcasting stations, hence the politicisation of media ownership.

During military rule, the press also faced institutional oppression, which was evident from the assassination of Dele Giwa in 1986 to the proscription of *The Guardian*, *National Concord* and *Punch* in the 1990s. Reporters were arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced on the flimsiest

allegations, including sedition and treason. By the year 1993, the Babangida regime had censored more than 300 publications, detained 54 journalists, and suspended various media channels (Ugondo & Ugbah, 2015). These trends show how, over the years, ownership and state power have converged in oppressing press freedom. The ownership versus biased coverage relationship becomes further supported by empirical studies. Having examined coverage by key Nigerian dailies around the 2015 presidential elections, Ojebuyi and Salawu (2018) have already revealed that the tone and prominence patterns of coverage can be strongly affected by ownership affiliations. The coverage of rival parties was often marginalised or framed using negative wording, pointing out a barely noticeable but potent ownership effect on agenda-setting.

With their research on Indonesian newspapers, Ekayanti and Xiaoming (2018) applied the Hierarchy of Influences Model and demonstrated that political ownership does not necessarily imply open interference in the newspaper production process but shapes newsrooms in ways that undermine media autonomy. This is especially relevant in environments where media owners retain the ability to hire and fire staff, thus exercising an indirect form of editorial control. Some methods of media capture refer to young democracies such as Nigeria and Indonesia, where legal and economic compulsion is accompanied by structural and cultural manipulation in the newsrooms.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Media Capture Theory and the Hierarchy of Influences Model.

Media Capture Theory

Postulated by Mungiu-Pippidi (2008), Media Capture Theory belongs to the tradition of political economy. It defines how political and economic elites manipulate media systems to their advantage so as to create narratives of their desire, silence critiques, and elude criticism. Its interpretation differs significantly from more traditional definitions of censorship since the former relies on structural processes of ownership concentration, advertisement manipulation, regulatory bullying, and patronage (Schiffrin, 2017; Dragomir, 2020). According to Schiffrin (2017), media capture refers to the scenario where governments or powerful political or economic players exercise dominance over the media to sustain their interest and shape public opinion (p. 3). This restriction may occur via mechanisms of the state and independent, non-governmental forces that support the political regime. Building upon the framework, Dragomir (2020) differentiates between state-led and elite-led capture by arguing that the former occurs when states monopolise media by regulating it and making it publicly owned, while the latter arises when individuals with political influence use media outlets to defend their financial interests and direct policies.

These two forms are present in the Nigerian context. Scholars such as Ciboh (2007) and Ukonu (2005) argue that regulatory bodies especially the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) have frequently declared arbitrary fines, cancelled licences or sanctioned stations considered critical of the ruling government. Privately owned stations, such as *The Nation* (Bola Ahmed Tinubu) and AIT (Raymond Dokpesi), have also come under fire for allegedly biased editorial practices owing to the political leanings of their owners. These ownership patterns reflect what Schiffrin (2017) describes as "a distortion of media systems in which journalism serves the powerful rather than the public" (p. 4).

Hierarchy of Influences Model

Developed by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), the Hierarchy of Influences Model provides a layered framework for analysing how news content is shaped at individual, routine, organisational, institutional, and societal levels. It describes intermediary channels through which

ownership and political affiliation impact editorial decisions in media organisations. According to Shoemaker and Reese (1996), "No single level of influence dominates media content; rather, they interact in a complex web" (p. 57). Ownership, which sits at the organisational level, has effects that cascade across other levels, shaping newsroom routines, constraining individual journalists, and aligning media narratives with broader institutional and ideological expectations. Nigerian empirical studies reveal structural factors that enable routinisation of self-censorship and selective reporting: fear of reprisal, dependence on political advertising revenue, and threat of regulatory sanction.

Using a similar framework in the context of Indonesian media, Ekayanti and Xiaoming (2018) find that political ownership is often realised not through overt censorship but via so-called interventionist newsrooms that encourage editors and reporters to internalise proprietorial interests. A similar phenomenon is observable in Nigeria, where journalists at politically affiliated publications tend to coordinate material selection with their owners' known preferences—even without direct instructions. The combination of Media Capture Theory and the Hierarchy of Influences Model serves as an explanatory paradigm: it not only clarifies the macro-level political economy of media control but also reveals the micro-level practices shaping journalism. This analysis enables a clear understanding of how ownership dynamics in Nigeria undermine journalistic independence, entrench elite interests, and erode democratic accountability. In addition to its contextual relevance, this empirically informed perspective provides comparative insights across political regimes.

Methodology

Research Design

This study involves the use of a qualitative single-case design to explore how media ownership structures and political affiliations can affect journalistic freedom in Nigeria. The analysis, based on the methodological framework developed by Yin (2018), focuses on the 2022 APC presidential primary election. This event serves as a focal point of media activity where elite interests, editorial choices, and ownership affiliations converge, making it an ideal context for examining how media capture unfolds. Qualitative content analysis is conducted within the case study design, following the systematic methodology outlined by Mayring (2010) and expanded by Drisko and Maschi (2016). This approach enables measurement of both manifest content (such as headlines, tone, and frequency) and latent themes (including ideological framing and editorial angle). According to Barry and Hafiz (2024), qualitative content analysis is particularly suited to explaining delicate and emergent phenomena, especially in contexts where media performance is shaped by power frameworks beyond the reach of quantitative tools.

Findings

Results from the content analysis are presented in tabular form according to the categories outlined in the coding sheet. The first category captures the number of stories published or broadcast on the APC 2022 presidential primary, spanning from the build-up period to the day following the conclusion of the primary. The result is presented as follows.

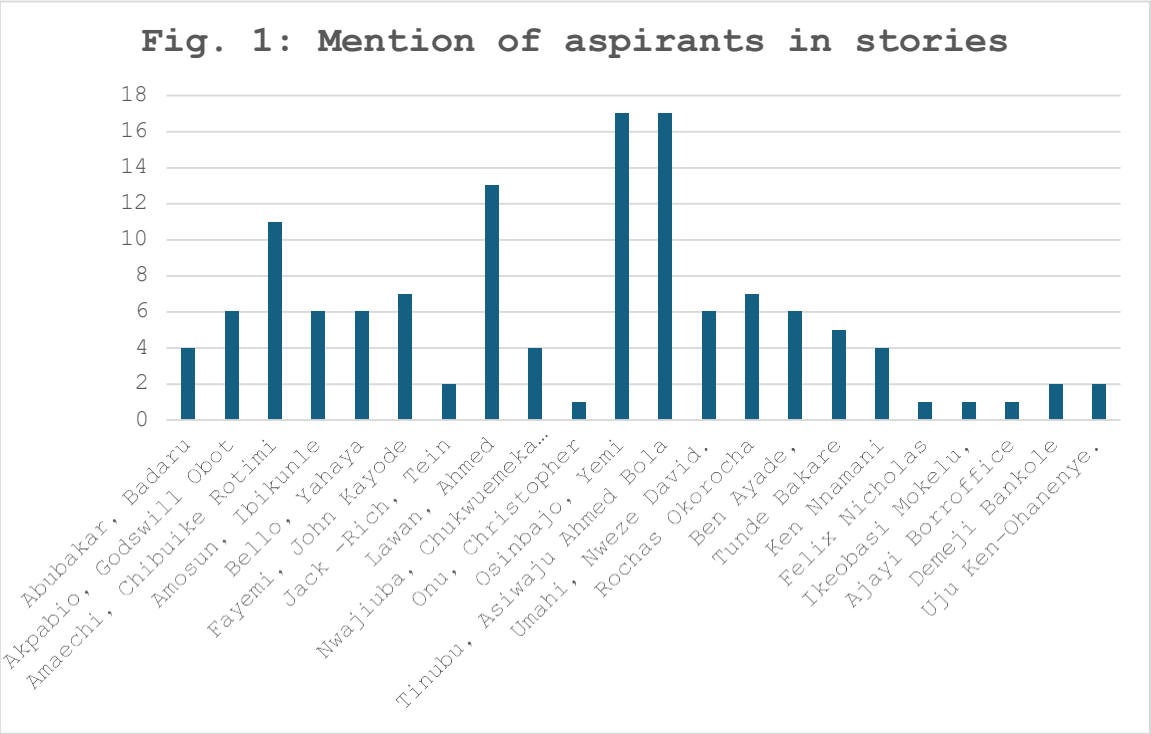
Table 1: Number of stories on the 2022 APC presidential primary.

Media	Owner	Frequency	Percentage
NTA	Government	17	15.74
TVC	Bola Tinubu	15	19.20
Channels	John Momoh	13	15.40
Arise	Nduka Obaigbena	11	11.50
Sahara TV	Omoyele Sowore	9	7.70
Daily Sun	Orji Kalu	7	11.50
The Nation	Bola Tinubu	7	15.40
FRCN	Government	16	3.90
Ray Power	Raymond Dokpesi	13	3.90
Total		**108**	**100**

The quantitative distribution of stories across the nine selected media outlets reveals key patterns in how ownership structures shaped the reportage of the 2022 APC presidential primaries. Out of a total of 108 stories analysed, the highest proportion originated from TVC, a television station owned by APC presidential aspirant Bola Ahmed Tinubu, accounting for 15 stories or approximately 19.2% of all stories. This was closely followed by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), a government-owned broadcaster, which published 17 stories, constituting 15.74% of the total. Similarly, Channels Television, a privately owned but non-partisan media house, produced 13 stories (15.4%), placing it among the most active outlets in the coverage.

This pattern suggests that both politically affiliated and ostensibly independent media organisations played prominent roles in reporting the primary, although for varying reasons. TVC's extensive coverage can be interpreted as an editorial strategy aligned with the political interests of its owner, reflecting what media capture theorists describe as the instrumentalisation of news platforms for political advancement. Channels Television's substantial contribution, despite lacking a direct political affiliation, appears to be driven by its reputation for covering nationally significant political events with broad public appeal.

Although these organisations are publicly funded and expected to maintain a measure of editorial neutrality, the volume of their reporting still places them within the upper tier of media coverage for the event. However, qualitative findings suggest that the tone and framing of government-owned media coverage were generally more cautious and institutionally driven, especially given President Muhammadu Buhari's declared neutrality during the primaries. The data illustrate a marked influence of media ownership on coverage frequency. In particular, candidates with direct control or indirect influence over media platforms, most notably Bola Ahmed Tinubu, enjoyed greater visibility through their outlets. This highlights the significant role of ownership in shaping editorial agendas, determining the frequency of stories, and, by extension, influencing public discourse during high-stakes political contests. Accordingly, the pattern of news distribution among the outlets demonstrates a lopsided media environment where editorial choices are regularly taken over by the interests of proprietors and broader political considerations. This trend is an affirmation of issues raised by media researchers and journalists on the nature of the freedom of journalism in Nigeria and the persistent problem of finding a balance between freedom of the press and the interests of political and economic regulation.



The graphical distribution in Fig. 1 shows the frequency at which each of the presidential aspirants appeared in the media coverage in the 2022 APC presidential primaries. The pattern of the visualisation depicts a sharp contrast of the representation of the media, and the discussion on the topic used to be dominated by a few attention-haunting competitors. The other contestants were given little or no attention at all.

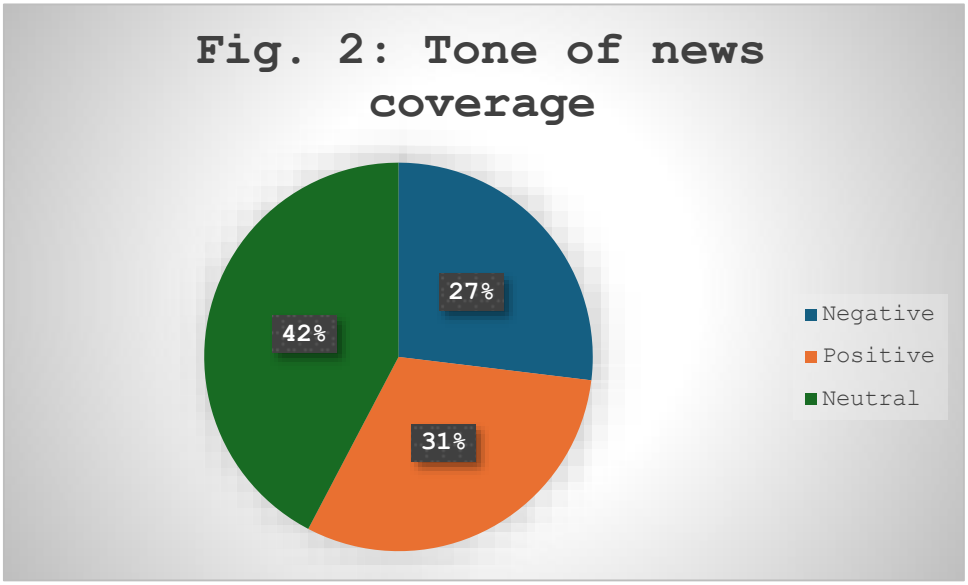
Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Yemi Osinbajo emerge as the most prominently mentioned aspirants, each with 17 references, representing the peak of media attention during the coverage period. This prominence is unsurprising, given Tinubu's dual role as both a leading aspirant and a major media proprietor, and Osinbajo's status as the sitting Vice President. Their elevated visibility reflects both their institutional significance and the capacity of media ownership and state power to shape editorial priorities. This validates the media capture thesis, which posits that media attention tends to reflect the structural advantages of ownership, incumbency, or elite affiliation rather than journalistic impartiality.

Following closely is Ahmed Lawan, who was mentioned 13 times. As Senate President and the subject of a controversial declaration as the party's consensus candidate by the APC National Chairman, Lawan's mentions can be linked to both his institutional prominence and the dramatic nature of the internal party disputes that surrounded his endorsement. His media visibility suggests that conflict and contestation, key news values, played a role in elevating his presence in reportage, regardless of ownership affiliation.

Compared to the more lengthily discussed candidates, a significant but case-specific grouping encompassing Uju Ken-Ohanenye, Ajayi Boroffice, Ikeobasi Mokelu, and Demiji Bankole appeared in the dataset most of the time, at most twice. Their comparatively lower visibility speaks to the gatekeeping ability of the media and to a structural marginalisation of the candidate with lower influence or those who are centred in a local, provincial region. The small

reporting of Uju Ken-Ohanenye, the sole female contestant who made it, serves as another confirmation of the occurrence of gendered exclusion and the highlighting of a larger narrowing of the political arena in Nigerian political journalism.

Overall, the distribution in Figure 1 confirms that media mentions during high-stakes political events are heavily skewed by structural hierarchies, such as political office, financial influence, media ownership, and elite endorsements. This uneven media visibility carries profound implications for democratic representation, as it undermines the principle of equal access to the public sphere and distorts voter perception by privileging select narratives over others.



According to Figure 2, the overall tone of the news coverage was predominantly neutral. About half (42%) of the stories indicated a neutral tone. The reason behind this form of neutrality could be that the art was a single-party affair. It is also possible that the aspirants who were predominantly mentioned enjoyed full media support and, therefore, were not hesitant about using the media. The government-owned media and Tinubu-owned media essentially captured the neutral tone among the selected media outlets.

About one-third of the stories were very positive in the coverage. The vestiges of ownership were in favour of the dominant hegemonic forces (Bola Tinubu and Yemi Osinbajo). For instance, the NTA and FRCN shunned all the negative angles focused on by Arise, Channels Television, and the Daily Sun newspaper. The fact that President Muhammadu Buhari took a neutral stance by not nominating his successor caused government-owned stations not to align with any aspirants and disparage others. In the story, "APC Presidential Primary: Buhari, not Tinubu, is the winner!" Ekundayo (2022) reported that President Buhari refused to be used as a rubber stamp for a stooge or surrogate of the powers that be within the presidency, against virtually all permutations of the political pundits. The writer suggested that this formula, which has saved the ruling party from implosion, may be a template for the future.

The third tonal direction in the stories is the negative tone. This negative tone was prevalent among Daily Sun, Arise TV and Sahara TV. As an ethnic and regional champion, the Daily Sun newspaper cast aspersions on the party's decision to open the race and not micro-zone it to the

South East. In such circumstances, the newspaper became the voice and sympathiser of aspirants from the Southeast geo-political zone. Daily Sun (June 8, 2022) captured Senator Nwajuba thus.

> I and other aspirants now of the south-east wrote to the leadership of our party to appreciate the commitment to move the presidential ticket to the south and request a further deepening to the southeast to reflect our primary reason for seeking the office, which remains, "to build a more united and inclusive secured and prosperous nation."

Another issue of negative tone was primarily related to the conduct of the primary. *Daily Sun* (June 8, 2022) reported that during the APC presidential primary, Vice President Yemi Osinbajo departed the convention venue. *Arise TV* (June 8, 2022) reported that Tinubu snubbed Osinbajo after victory at the APC Convention.

Another coding category was to establish the slant of the stories. Like the tonal direction of the stories, most were tilted to regions or aspirants. This exemplifies the adage that he who pays the piper dictates the tune. Media professionalism is often compromised due to a bias influenced by ownership interests. The selection of guest writers, discussants, and even the reporter or anchor has exhibited ownership influence. Although the broadcast stations strive to demonstrate objectivity by reflecting every diversity, the nature of their probing differs. However, the stations have tried to moderate language use to avoid unnecessary litigation.

Findings from the Interviews

1. Ownership Structures and the Framing of Political Coverage

Respondents overwhelmingly affirmed that media ownership played a defining role in shaping political coverage during the APC 2022 presidential primaries. Politicians and journalists alike reported that aspirants received disproportionate coverage based on their affiliations with or proximity to media proprietors. An APC strategist noted, *"We knew where to push our stories—if the owner was for you, you got coverage. If not, silence."* A political correspondent corroborated this, observing that editorial framing was frequently dictated by "upstairs orders," especially when the outlet's owner had a vested political interest.

This reflects a deep entanglement of editorial priorities with ownership ideology. Aspirants associated with proprietors, such as Bola Ahmed Tinubu, enjoyed amplified coverage with positive framing, while others were sidelined or portrayed in more neutral or negative tones.

2. Editorial Treatment of Aspirants across Government and Private Media

Significant editorial differences emerged between government-owned and privately owned media. Interviewees from public broadcasters (e.g., NTA and FRCN) indicated that while they did not receive direct government directives, there was an institutional expectation to maintain neutrality or subtly reflect the ruling party's interests. One media respondent explained, *"We were cautious, not just about tone, but about who to feature and how much."*

Conversely, respondents from privately-owned media houses described a different kind of constraint. A senior newspaper editor stated, *"There's no real independence. When your proprietor is in the race, your headlines become campaign slogans."* Journalists also described subtle yet powerful mechanisms of editorial control, such as the privileging of aspirants' events, the avoidance of dissenting views, and the selection of expert commentators who echoed the owner's position.

3. Perceptions of Political Pressure and Editorial Compromise

Nearly all media professionals interviewed acknowledged the existence of political pressure in their work. These pressures, they explained, were not always overt, but structural and persistent. Political analysts admit that, in the modern journalism, self-censorship is a common

practice among practitioners. One columnist put it thus, you become self-censorious. It is sometimes not what your editor says, but what you know not to say." One of the broadcast journalists confirmed this when he said, "You do not report what might hurt the owner, even though it is news. That is off the book." Politicians too verified such forces, as a PDP media aide reported how "some journalists apologised to us [behind the scenes], they wanted to publish our stories but could not get clearance with their editorial boards." The interviewees depicted an unnerving picture of professional compromise, a phenomenon that they related to ownership pressures, political clientelism, and the menace of payback. Their narratives highlighted a general feeling of constraint. Credibility, freedom of action and innovation were all said to be constrained by such dynamics.

4. Media Capture and Broader Structural Patterns in Nigerian Journalism

As a reaction to the empirical results obtained through the APC primary elections, most of the interviewees came up with the conclusion that the trends seen were symptomatic of larger structural failures of Nigerian journalism. The effect of media capture, they said, is institutionalised, influenced by a political economy of dependency, patronage, and elite consolidation. An ANPP respondent remarked, *"This didn't start today. From colonial times, media ownership in Nigeria has been political first, professional second."*

A senior journalist traced the trend to the financing model of Nigerian media, stating, *"Most outlets survive on political advertising and government patronage. So editorial independence is always on a leash."* The case of the APC primaries, they argued, laid bare how partisanship and ownership align to reshape public discourse.

5. Mitigating Ownership Bias and Enhancing Editorial Independence

Participants proposed several pathways for reform. Politicians called for more robust public oversight of both state-owned and private media. One LP spokesperson advocated for *"a truly independent public broadcaster, like the BBC, not a mouthpiece of the government."* A PDP respondent stressed the importance of *"mandatory ownership disclosure laws, so audiences know who's funding what they consume."*

Among media professionals, the dominant call was for structural and professional safeguards. The political correspondent argued, *"We need stronger unions and editorial boards that can resist ownership interference."* The newspaper editor added, *"Alternative funding—like crowd-sourced journalism and media grants, could liberate us from the pocket of politicians."* Additionally, all media respondents agreed on the importance of media literacy campaigns to help citizens identify and question biased coverage.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study present a compelling case for the pervasive influence of media ownership on political journalism in Nigeria, particularly in the context of the 2022 APC presidential primaries. Drawing on both qualitative content analysis and key informant interviews, the data reveal entrenched patterns of media capture, editorial compromise, and structural partisanship that echo existing scholarly critiques of postcolonial media ecologies (McChesney, 2004; Oso, 2012).

The prominence of politically owned media, such as TVC and The Nation, both under the proprietorship of presidential aspirant Bola Ahmed Tinubu, highlights a classic case of what Althusser (1971) describes as ideological state apparatuses operating within the private sphere. Together, these outlets produced nearly one-third of the total coverage, overwhelmingly surpassing editorial contributions from other media houses. This confirms the thesis that media ownership

functions not merely as an economic or structural determinant but as a mechanism of symbolic dominance (Bourdieu, 1998), allowing owners to curate public discourse in their political favour.

The state-owned media, including NTA and FRCN, were also comparatively high in volume, but there was neutrality in the scope of coverage as President Buhari was non-interventionist. However, the qualitative accounts from journalists reveal a more subtle dynamic at play: self-censorship and institutional caution driven not by explicit directives, but by historically ingrained expectations to preserve the image of the ruling party. This phenomenon aligns with Herman and Chomsky's (1988) "propaganda model," where media serve elite interests not necessarily through coercion but through routinised editorial practices and institutional inertia.

The variation in editorial treatment of aspirants further underscores the performative nature of partisanship in media framing. While Tinubu and Osinbajo received overwhelmingly positive or neutral coverage, aspirants such as Chukwuemeka Nwajiuba and Uju Ken-Ohanenye, as well as other non-aligned figures, were largely absent or marginalised. These asymmetries in visibility and framing are not coincidental; they reflect a convergence of media logic and political capital, where media attention is allocated based on ownership, incumbency, and elite affiliation, rather than newsworthiness or public interest (Entman, 2007).

Interview data deepen this diagnosis. Journalists repeatedly spoke of "upstairs orders" and "unwritten rules," suggesting a climate of implicit editorial repression. This normalisation of self-censorship reveals a professional culture structured by dependency, risk aversion, and political capture, a pattern confirmed by previous studies on Nigerian journalism (Ojebode, 2013; Olorunnisola & Douai, 2013). Politicians, on their part, expressed awareness of these dynamics, with several recounting how media access was either denied or mediated by ownership considerations. This dual awareness, from producers and subjects of news, reinforces the notion of journalism in Nigeria as a field of constrained agency, shaped by overlapping economic, political, and ideological pressures.

The tone and bias of coverage also confirm such structural bias. Although a significant percentage of the narratives were assigned to the code of neutrality, it seems more like a tactical silence rather than an indication of objectivity. Positively toned stories mostly favoured hegemonic actors such as Tinubu and Osinbajo. On the other hand, negative news was mostly put out by media houses that had hostile or geo-based editorial policies, like Arise TV and Daily Sun. In this case, tone is employed as an ideological place holder, a mechanism of managing political emotion and supporting property interests.

Notably, the findings also reveal the weakness of professional norms in the resistance to ownership-driven bias. Despite the stated desire of several journalists and editors to be independent, the structural circumstances of media production, the necessity of political advertising, insufficient funding for public interest, and poor unionisation make such aims mostly nominal. This is a confirmation of the claim by Oso (2012) that journalism in Nigeria is the profession that finds itself suspended between commercialisation and co-optation and cannot get out of the logic of political patronage completely.

Conclusion

This paper explored the influence of media ownership systems on political reporting, editorial independence, and the undermining of journalistic ethics in the Nigerian democratic society. The qualitative content analysis and key informant interviews of APC presidential primaries of the year 2022, as a case example, show that the culture of media capture is deeply

rooted in the country, with ownership stakeholders, rather than journalistic standards, deciding the tone, political visibility, and slant.

The research supports the fact that the media are vulnerable to elite control. In privately held outlets, partisanship is linked to the political aspirations or loyalties of the owner, which results in over-coverage of favoured candidates. The control is more subtle in the state-owned stores, where it usually appears in the form of institutional bias and habitual favouritism toward incumbents and discourage dissent. The professional ambitions of journalists are continuously compromised by economic demands, political bias and a weak institutional set up.

Such undercurrents do not only distort the discourse in the society but also create a crisis in the credibility of the media as a democratic institution. By turning media outlets into the annexes of the power blocs of the elite, the potential of the press as the "Fourth Estate" is essentially negated. This has created an extremely polarised and unequal media environment in which the political expediency is placed above the public interest.

Thus, ending this crisis requires more than lip service. It needs structural re-arrangement, institutional determination and common struggle through the media, civil society and governance structures. It is only at this point that journalism in Nigeria can once again reclaim its mandate as a watchdog of the power and provide news that serve public interest.

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