



From Gatekeepers to Ghosts: The Decline of Local Newspapers and Its Effects on Civic Engagement, A Case Study of Nigeria

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Abstract. The decline of local newspapers constitutes one of the most consequential yet undertheorized crises in contemporary African democratic studies. While the global retreat of print media has generated substantial scholarship in the Global North, the ramifications of this decline within Nigerian political contexts remain insufficiently examined. This paper offers a theoretically grounded, historically contextualised qualitative account of the structural erosion of local newspaper patronage in Nigeria, and proposes a causal mechanism, rather than claiming empirical proof of causation, through which this erosion weakens civic engagement at community and sub-national levels. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, Habermasian public sphere philosophy (as critically reworked through Fraser's subaltern counter publics), and Putnam's social capital framework, the paper constructs an integrated analytical framework to examine how local print journalism functions as civic infrastructure. Using historical analysis, three structured comparative case studies, and engagement with primary documentation from field reports, institutional audits, and practitioner accounts, the paper demonstrates that Nigeria's transition from a robust print culture to fragmented digital media consumption has not produced an equivalent civic substitute. The paper is explicit about the limits of its evidence: it argues by mechanism and analogy rather than by large-N causal inference, and it calls for original survey and interview research to test the causal claims advanced here. Policy and industry recommendations conclude the paper.

Keywords: Local Newspapers, Civic Engagement, Nigeria, Press Decline, News Deserts, Subaltern

Counterpublics, Democratic Participation, Political Economy of Media, Print Media, Qualitative Case Study.

1. Introduction

In 1937, the Zik Group of Newspapers, founded by Nnamdi Azikiwe, one of Africa's foremost nationalist intellectuals, launched what would become one of the most consequential press operations in colonial West Africa. Papers such as the West African Pilot did not merely report news; they constructed political consciousness, mobilised communities, and made possible the public deliberation through which a colonised people began to imagine themselves as citizens. The newspaper, in that era, was not a commodity. It was a civic institution, a counterpublic space in which communities excluded from official power could articulate their interests, challenge authority, and cultivate the informational solidarity that democratic participation requires.

Nearly nine decades later, that institution is in retreat. Across Nigeria's thirty-six states, local and regional newspapers have shuttered, reduced their print runs, or migrated to irregular online presences that command little of the social authority once vested in newsprint. The Nigerian Tribune, founded in 1949 and long regarded as the voice of the Yoruba intelligentsia, has struggled with chronic underfunding and dwindling circulation. The New Nigerian, historically the paper of record for Nigeria's vast northern communities, has intermittently ceased publication. Dozens of state-owned newspapers operate at a fraction of their former

capacity, publishing irregularly and reaching audiences a shadow of their historical size.

This paper takes seriously the civic consequences of this collapse. It is important to be precise about what is being argued and what is not. The paper does not claim, on the basis of its methodology, to have demonstrated that local newspaper decline caused civic disengagement in a statistically rigorous sense, such a claim would require large-N quantitative analysis or experimental design that is beyond the scope of this qualitative study. What the paper does argue, and what the historical, structural, and case evidence supports, is that a plausible and theoretically coherent mechanism connects local newspaper decline to civic disengagement, and that this mechanism is sufficiently evidenced in the Nigerian context to constitute a compelling scholarly hypothesis warranting further empirical investigation. This distinction between causal mechanism and causal proof is observed throughout.

The paper's central argument is as follows: the decline of local newspapers in Nigeria has dismantled the informational infrastructure communities require to participate meaningfully in democratic life, and through three specific mechanisms, the collapse of the watchdog function, the erosion of voter information environments, and the fragmentation of community identity, it has materially reduced the conditions of possibility for civic engagement. This argument is developed across nine sections. The paper begins with a theoretically integrated literature review, traces the historical arc of the Nigerian press, provides an empirical account of local newspaper decline, analyses the specific civic functions being lost, and offers three structured comparative case studies grounded in primary documentation. The paper then critically assesses digital media as a putative substitute, advances recommendations, and offers concluding reflections on the democratic stakes of its analysis.

For the purposes of this paper, 'local newspapers' refers to state-level dailies, regional weeklies, and community papers operating below the national tier, organs whose primary audience and editorial focus is sub-national. This excludes national titles such as *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, and *This Day*, which operate with markedly different resources and serve a qualitatively different civic function. Where the term 'news desert' is borrowed from the American literature, its application to the Nigerian context is handled critically: unlike U.S. news deserts, which describe communities that once had newspapers and lost them, some Nigerian communities, particularly rural ones, were underserved by local journalism even at the apex

of print culture. The concept is accordingly modified to denote communities with insufficient sustained local journalistic coverage, irrespective of historical precedent.

2. Literature Review

This section constructs an integrated analytical framework from three theoretical traditions. Rather than deploying these in parallel, as prior work has tended to do (see Adeyanju, 2014; Omoera, 2010), the goal here is to articulate their points of intersection, tension, and complementarity so that they do genuine conceptual work in interpreting the Nigerian case.

2.1 Agenda-Setting Theory and Its Limits

McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting framework, developed through their Chapel Hill study, provides the first major resource. The argument is foundational: the press does not merely reflect reality but actively structures what publics consider salient. By selecting which stories appear prominently and which are ignored, newspapers set the cognitive agenda of communities. McCombs's (2004) extension to second-level agenda-setting deepens this insight: media shapes not only what people think about it but how they think about it, the attributes and framings through which issues are understood. In the Nigerian local context, the practical import of both levels is stark. A functioning community newspaper determines whether residents know about the misappropriation of local government funds, the condition of primary schools, or the agenda of the next council meeting. Its absence removes the mechanism through which communities assign civic salience to local political events.

Agenda-setting theory is, however, limited for present purposes in at least two ways. First, it was developed in contexts where the press exercised oligopolistic control over public information, a condition that digital fragmentation has complicated everywhere, and that state ownership has always complicated in Nigeria. Second, agenda-setting is primarily a theory of media effects on individual cognition; it does not explain the structural and institutional conditions under which journalism sustains civic life as a collective phenomenon. The public sphere and social capital frameworks address these gaps.

2.2 Public Sphere Theory: Habermas, Fraser, and the Nigerian Case

Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere offers the paper's second theoretical anchor (Habermas,

1989). The core insight, that a functioning democracy requires spaces of informed public deliberation distinct from both the state and the market, and that journalism is instrumentally essential to those spaces, retains significant analytical purchase. However, its application to the Nigerian case requires critical reworking that goes beyond the single-sentence acknowledgement that earlier scholarship has offered.

Habermas's critics have mounted two objections of direct relevance here. First, Fraser (1990) demonstrated that the bourgeois public sphere was constituted through exclusions, of women, the working class, and colonial subjects, that were not incidental but structural. The deliberation it hosted was rational-critical in form but exclusionary in practice. Second, Calhoun (1992) and others have argued that the normative ideal of a unified public sphere obscures the actual plurality of publics in any complex society. These critiques do not merely qualify Habermas; they reorient the analytical framework.

Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics is particularly generative for the Nigerian case. Subaltern counterpublics are, in Fraser's formulation, parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. This concept captures what Nigerian local newspapers actually were and did far more accurately than the Habermasian ideal of rational-critical deliberation. They did not approximate an idealized bourgeois public sphere; they functioned as counterpublic spaces in which communities marginalised from federal and state power, ethnic minorities, rural communities, communities in conflict zones, constructed civic identity, documented official abuses, and created a shared informational record. The loss of these counterpublic spaces is a more specific and more serious civic harm than the loss of a bourgeois public sphere would be, because counterpublics serve populations with fewer alternative institutional resources.

The counterpublic lens also illuminates why state-owned newspapers, when editorially subordinated to government, fail their communities: they are converted from counterpublic spaces into organs of official discourse, precisely reversing the civic function the counterpublic framework identifies as valuable. The political capture of state-owned local newspapers in Nigeria is thus not a corruption of journalism as such but the destruction of counterpublic capacity, and it is analytically distinct from the market-driven decline affecting commercial local papers.

2.3 Social Capital, Newspapers, and Community Cohesion

Putnam's (2000) social capital framework provides the third theoretical resource. His research demonstrated empirically that newspaper readership correlates positively with civic participation, voting, community volunteering, attending public meetings, and joining civic associations. The mechanisms are both informational (readers learn what is happening in their communities and are thus empowered to participate) and constitutive (the shared experience of reading the same paper produces a sense of collective identity and mutual obligation). Putnam distinguished between bridging social capital, connections across social cleavages, and bonding social capital, which strengthens ties within groups. Local newspapers, he argued, are particularly important for bridging capital because they create a shared information commons accessible to community members across class, occupational, and generational lines.

In the Nigerian context, Adeyanju (2014) has extended Putnam's framework to argue that local media serve as particularly important bridging capital resources in ethnically diverse communities, where shared information environments reduce the salience of ethnic difference in civic deliberation. This extension is significant: Nigeria's political culture has been characterised by the competitive mobilisation of ethnic identities in ways that undermine cross-cutting civic engagement. Local newspapers that addressed shared civic concerns, governance quality, service delivery, economic conditions, potentially created informational conditions in which civic identity competed with ethnic identity as a basis for political participation.

2.4 Integrating the Framework

Synthesised, the three frameworks converge on a single structural claim: local newspapers function as civic infrastructure. They set the cognitive agenda of communities (agenda-setting), provide the counterpublic space through which marginalised communities construct and sustain civic identities (counterpublic theory), and generate the social capital that connects civic knowledge to civic action (social capital theory). These functions are not separate; they are mutually reinforcing. A newspaper that covers local government proceedings sets an accountability agenda, provides a space for counter-discourse against official misconduct, and creates the shared informational substrate that motivates collective civic action.

Critically, this integrated framework generates a specific empirical prediction: the decline of local newspapers should affect civic engagement most severely in communities that are most marginalised from alternative informational resources, rural communities, ethnic minorities, low-income communities, and communities in regions with weak digital infrastructure. This prediction is consistent with the evidence reviewed in subsequent sections and provides a falsifiable hypothesis for future survey-based research to test.

3. Historical Context: Nigerian Newspapers and Civic Life

3.1 The Golden Age of Nigerian Print Media

Nigerian newspapers have a history inseparable from the history of Nigerian politics. The *Iwe Irohin*, founded by the Reverend Henry Townsend in Abeokuta in 1859, is conventionally regarded as the first newspaper on Nigerian soil. Printed partly in Yoruba, a deliberate choice that positioned the press not as an instrument of colonial administration but as a medium of vernacular civic communication, it inaugurated a tradition of local-language journalism that served populations excluded from English-language official discourse. By the early twentieth century, a vibrant if geographically concentrated press culture had developed in Lagos and Calabar, feeding the aspirations of a nascent Nigerian intelligentsia.

The interwar and immediate post-war period witnessed an explosion of nationalist print culture. Azikiwe's *West African Pilot*, launched in 1937, became the principal organ of Nigerian nationalism, achieving circulations of up to 12,000 copies daily at its peak, a remarkable figure for colonial-era West Africa (Omu, 1978). The paper served simultaneously as political mobiliser, community educator, and what Fraser would later call a counterpublic: a space in which communities excluded from colonial power constructed their political identities, contested official narratives, and imagined a post-colonial future. The newspaper, in this period, was not merely documenting civic life; it was constituting it.

After independence in 1960, the regional structure of Nigerian federalism was reflected in a differentiated press landscape. The Northern Region's *New Nigerian* (founded 1966), the Western Region's *Nigerian Tribune* (1949), and a range of Eastern Region papers gave voice to regionally specific political cultures and served as accountability mechanisms for regional governments. For millions of Nigerians below the national political radar, these papers constituted their

primary connection to institutionalised public information.

3.2 The Civic Functions of Local and State Newspapers

The civic functions performed by Nigerian local newspapers extended across several analytically distinct dimensions. In the domain of political accountability, local papers regularly covered the proceedings of state houses of assembly, local government councils, and administrative tribunals, institutions whose activities national papers rarely reported. Uche (1992) found that community and state-level papers in southeastern Nigeria were the primary source of information about local government administration for over sixty percent of rural respondents surveyed, a finding that establishes the empirical baseline against which subsequent decline must be measured.

The counterpublic function was particularly significant in the context of Nigeria's ethnic and linguistic plurality. With over five hundred distinct languages and hundreds of distinct cultural communities, the national press necessarily operated in registers that excluded large portions of the population. Local papers, by contrast, often published bilingual content, addressed culturally specific concerns, and spoke with an intimacy of local knowledge that national editors could not replicate. For minority ethnic communities, the Tiv of Benue State, the Ijaw communities of the Niger Delta, the Kanuri of Borno, the local press was frequently the only journalistic institution that treated their concerns as newsworthy and that served as a counterpublic space for their civic self-expression.

The social capital dimension of local newspaper function operated through both information and ritual. Newspapers published names of scholarship recipients, announced community deaths and funerals, reported on traditional festivals, and photographed local schools and hospitals. These constitutive functions created the shared information commons that Putnam identifies as generative of civic solidarity. For diaspora Nigerians, a significant constituency from the 1970s onwards, as rural-urban migration intensified, local newspapers shared among migrant communities in Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Kano sustained civic and emotional connection to communities of origin, maintaining the bonds that animate hometown development associations and community philanthropy.

4. The Decline: Patterns, Causes, and Evidence

4.1 Circulation and Patronage Trends

The empirical record of local newspaper decline in Nigeria is consistent across multiple sources, though it requires critical handling. The Audit Bureau of Circulations Nigeria (ABC Nigeria) has historically had limited reach among smaller publications, and publisher-reported circulation figures are notoriously unreliable. Where specific circulation claims are made in this paper, their sources and provenance are identified explicitly.

The Nigerian Tribune, historically one of Nigeria's highest-circulation regional papers, reported verified circulation of approximately 50,000 copies daily in the early 1990s, a figure drawn from Dare's (2011) survey of the Nigerian press citing ABC Nigeria data from that period. Industry analysis by SBM Intelligence (2022), a political risk consultancy whose media estimates are drawn from advertiser surveys and distribution audits rather than publisher declarations, and whose methodology is documented in its reports, placed Tribune circulation below 15,000 by 2015, with intermittent print runs thereafter. The New Nigerian, the flagship paper of northern Nigeria, suspended regular publication multiple times between 2010 and 2023, with its Kaduna-based printing plant operating well below capacity due to funding shortfalls and newsprint costs (Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development, 2019). It should be noted that precise circulation figures for the New Nigerian in its latter years are unavailable from independent audit, and the paper's irregular publication schedule makes consistent measurement impossible.

The collapse of street vendor networks provides a structural index of decline less dependent on self-reported figures. The newspaper hawker, a ubiquitous feature of Nigerian urban life from the 1960s through the 1990s, has become increasingly scarce in secondary cities and is essentially absent from rural areas. This distribution collapse means that papers that continue to print are physically inaccessible to large portions of their nominal catchment areas, a finding documented by the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development through field assessments in six Nigerian states between 2017 and 2019 (CJID, 2019).

4.2 The Political Economy of Decline: Global and Local Drivers

The economic drivers of Nigerian local newspaper decline are both global and locally specific, and the

locally specific dimensions deserve amplification because they are largely absent from the Global North literature that dominates media economics scholarship. The global driver is the migration of advertising revenue to digital platforms. Classified advertising, historically a primary revenue source for local newspapers, has migrated to free or low-cost online platforms. Display advertising has moved to social media, whose targeting capabilities and measurable engagement metrics make them more attractive to advertisers than print.

In Nigeria, these global pressures compound with structural economic conditions that have no equivalent in the United States or United Kingdom. Newsprint costs in Nigeria are denominated in foreign currency: Nigeria has no domestic newsprint production capacity, and the entire industry depends on imports priced in dollars or euros. Naira's sustained depreciation between 2020 and 2024, from approximately N380 per dollar to over N1,500 per dollar at the official rate, effectively multiplied the real cost of newsprint imports fourfold for publishers whose revenues are in Naira. This mechanism constitutes a structural vulnerability of Nigerian print journalism with no parallel in the Global North analysis, and it means that the economic models developed to explain newspaper decline in the United States or United Kingdom require significant modification before being applied to Nigeria.

A second locally specific driver is the chronic unreliability of electricity supply, which increases dependence on diesel-powered generators and inflates operational costs dramatically. Printing is energy-intensive; a paper that cannot afford diesel cannot print. The compounding of newsprint import costs and energy costs creates a cost structure in which local newspapers in Nigeria operate at permanent financial disadvantage relative to digital-only outlets, irrespective of audience demand.

4.3 Digital Disruption and Audience Fragmentation

The rise of digital media has drawn Nigerian readers, especially urban, educated, and younger audiences, away from print. National online outlets such as Premium Times (founded 2011), The Cable (2014), and Pulse.ng have captured significant readership among digitally connected Nigerians. Their investigative reporting on federal corruption has been genuinely significant for national accountability journalism. However, as Section 7 analyses in detail, their emergence does not compensate for the loss of local print newspapers in civic terms, because their

editorial focus is overwhelmingly national and their distribution model requires digital infrastructure unavailable to a majority of Nigerians.

WhatsApp has emerged as the dominant news distribution channel across income groups in Nigeria, including among populations without formal internet subscriptions, through the use of downloaded content and shared devices. While WhatsApp broadcast channels and group chats perform some information aggregation functions, they do not produce original reporting. The medium's architecture, private, group-based, algorithmically ungoverned, also makes it an effective vector for misinformation, which in the Nigerian context has included fabricated election results, ethnic incitement content, and false health information documented by fact-checking organisations including Dubawa (2022) and Africa Check.

4.4 Political Capture and Ownership Pressures

A fourth driver requires particular analytical attention: the structural subordination of the local press to political patronage. The majority of surviving local and state-level newspapers in Nigeria are state-government owned, a legacy of the military era when federal policy encouraged state governments to establish official organs. This ownership structure has profoundly compromised civic independence. State-owned papers function primarily as publicity vehicles for state governments, covering gubernatorial activities extensively while avoiding critical reporting on official conduct.

The consequences for civic engagement are self-reinforcing in a manner that the integrated framework of Section 2 helps to make explicit. Political capture destroys the counterpublic function: a newspaper that ventriloquises official discourse rather than hosting opposition to it is not a counterpublic space; it is an extension of the state apparatus. As communities recognise this, trust and readership decline. Declining readership deepens financial dependence on government subvention. Deeper subvention entrenches editorial subordination. Omoera's (2010) documentation of this cycle in Niger Delta state media provides the strongest existing empirical account of the process, though a systematic study across multiple states remains a gap in the literature.

5. Civic Engagement: What Is Being Lost

5.1 Defining and Operationalising Civic Engagement

Civic engagement, for the purposes of this paper, encompasses four analytically distinct but empirically related dimensions: electoral participation (registering to vote, voting, monitoring elections), governance engagement (attending public hearings, petitioning representatives, tracking budget and policy implementation), community organising (participating in town unions, ward committees, and civic associations), and civic communication (consuming and discussing public affairs information, contributing to public fora, holding and expressing informed opinions about governance). This four-dimensional definition, drawing on Verba, Scholzman, and Brady's (1995) civic voluntarism model and adapted to the Nigerian context, is intended to distinguish civic engagement from partisan political activity, the mobilisation of voters through patronage, ethnicity, or cash, which operates entirely independently of civic journalism and which has historically been the primary driver of electoral participation in Nigerian local government elections.

The distinction matters analytically. The claim of this paper is not that local newspapers drive electoral turnout per se, patronage politics and ethnic mobilisation do that without any journalistic mediation, but that they provide the informational substrate for a more substantive form of civic life: one in which citizens can evaluate the conduct of their representatives, make governance-based rather than identity-based political choices, and hold power accountable through informed collective action. This is what the integrated framework in Section 2 identifies as the civic infrastructure function of local journalism, and it is this function whose erosion the paper documents.

5.2 The Watchdog Function and the Accountability Gap

The most immediately demonstrable civic cost of local newspaper decline is the loss of the watchdog function. In the Nigerian governance structure, the 774 local government areas (LGAs) are constitutionally designated as the third tier of government, collectively receiving tens of billions of naira monthly in federation account allocations. How these funds are spent, how much reaches intended beneficiaries, how projects are selected and contracts awarded, how procurement decisions are made, represents one of the most consequential governance questions in Nigeria.

Yet LGA governance is almost entirely invisible in national media. National newspapers and digital platforms do not maintain correspondents in most LGAs. Television and radio stations rarely cover ward-level politics systematically. The only journalism that has historically covered LGA governance has been local and community newspapers.

BudgIT's (2021) State of States report documented that the majority of Nigerian LGAs do not publish their budgets publicly, do not produce audited accounts accessible to citizens, and operate procurement systems without independent oversight. The report's researchers attributed significant portions of this opacity to the absence of journalistic scrutiny, not because journalists were explicitly excluded, but because no journalistic institution existed in most LGAs with the capacity or mandate to request, analyse, and publish such information. This is a structural accountability vacuum, and it is not the consequence of any single governance failure but of the compound effect of newspaper decline removing the only institutional monitor of sub-national finance.

5.3 Voter Information and Electoral Participation

The relationship between local newspaper decline and electoral disengagement requires careful argument. Research on voter information in African electoral contexts, drawing on Bratton's (2008) Afrobarometer-based analysis of civic competence across seventeen African countries, and Lindberg's (2006) study of electoral knowledge in West Africa, establishes that access to credible information about candidates and governance performance is positively associated with issue-based rather than identity-based voting, and with sustained electoral engagement beyond single electoral cycles. These studies are not Nigeria-specific, and the present paper does not claim that they establish the Nigerian relationship directly. They do, however, provide the theoretical and comparative grounding for a plausible mechanism: in communities where local newspapers historically performed voter education functions, profiling candidates, reporting on campaign promises and their fulfilment, covering LGA election processes, the loss of that informational resource removes an input to the deliberative dimension of electoral participation.

Nigeria's State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), which administer local government elections in each state, are widely regarded as lacking independence from state governments (Omotola, 2010). The Independent National Electoral Commission's civic education mandate focuses primarily on federal elections. In communities where

local newspapers once supplemented this institutional deficit, their absence leaves voters dependent on partisan campaign materials and social media rumour for information about local candidates, neither of which approximates the editorial standards of independent local journalism.

5.4 Community Identity, Voice, and the Silencing of Minority Communities

Beyond formal political processes, local newspapers performed constitutive civic functions, those concerned with the construction and maintenance of community identity, that are harder to operationalise but no less real. Local papers published the names of scholarship recipients, announced deaths and funerals of community members, reported on traditional festivals, and created the shared informational commons through which geographically dispersed members of a community-maintained connection to their place of origin. These functions generated what Putnam (2000) would identify as bonding social capital, the dense, trust-based ties within communities that sustain collective action capacity.

The silencing of minority voices is a particularly acute dimension of this loss, and it is here that the counterpublic framework of Fraser (1990) is most analytically precise. National newspapers and their digital successors are predominantly Lagos-centred in editorial culture. Minority communities, smaller ethnic groups, linguistically distinct populations, geographically peripheral communities, are represented in national media in proportion to their demographic and economic weight in the national picture, which is often negligible. Local newspapers were the primary institutional correction to this marginalisation. Their decline has not been compensated by digital alternatives that replicate their hyperlocal focus or cultural intimacy. The communities most marginalised from national media are precisely those with the weakest digital connectivity, meaning that the transition from print to digital has compounded rather than corrected the informational exclusion of minority communities.

6. Structured Comparative Case Studies

Beyond The three case studies that follow are selected according to explicit criteria of variation and are analysed using the integrated framework developed in Section 2. The selection logic is as follows: Case A (North-West) represents a context of complete collapse of the primary regional newspaper, compounded by security crisis conditions, allowing analysis of the watchdog and counterpublic functions in their absence. Case B (Nigerian Tribune, South-

West) represents a case of institutional survival through compromise, allowing analysis of what is preserved and what is lost when a paper adapts to adverse conditions through editorial accommodation. Case C (Plateau State) represents a geographic news desert condition in a context of communal conflict, allowing analysis of all three civic function dimensions simultaneously. Together, the cases span geopolitical zones, ownership types, and crisis contexts, providing variation on the key independent and dependent variables while sharing the common condition of reduced local newspaper presence. It is acknowledged that primary survey or interview data from community members in these areas would substantially strengthen the evidence base; the absence of such data is a limitation of the current study that future research should address.

6.1 Case A: The Collapse of the New Nigerian and North-West Civic Accountability

The seven states of Nigeria's North-West geopolitical zone collectively contain approximately 35 million people, with the highest rates of multidimensional poverty, lowest adult literacy rates, and weakest digital connectivity of any geopolitical zone in the country (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The New Nigerian, historically based in Kaduna and founded in 1966, represented for decades the primary journalistic voice of northern Nigeria. At its peak, the paper-maintained correspondents in all northern states, covered the proceedings of state houses of assembly, and served as the primary public record of northern governance.

The paper's decline followed the trajectory documented in Section 4: privatisation in 2001 transferred ownership to a consortium of northern state governments, but chronic underfunding and the withdrawal of state advertising revenues reduced the paper to intermittent publication by the mid-2000s. By 2018, editions were appearing irregularly, with periods of several weeks between publications. State-level correspondents had their retainers terminated. The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development's (2019) field assessment of media in Kaduna, Kano, and Katsina documented the absence of any functioning local newspaper with LGA-level reporting capacity in these states by 2018.

The civic significance of this collapse is most starkly illustrated by the North-West's Bandit crisis, large-scale armed conflict involving non-state actors, local militias, and displaced farming communities that has killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands since approximately 2011. The absence of functioning

local journalism has meant that communities affected by this crisis have had no institutionalised journalistic channel through which to document their experiences for state authorities or the national public. The International Committee of the Red Cross's (2021) Nigeria humanitarian report documented specific cases of villages experiencing extended periods of siege without any journalistic documentation, not because journalists were excluded by deliberate policy, but because no local journalistic infrastructure existed to cover sub-LGA events. This finding, drawn from ICRC field documentation rather than inferred, represents one of the most direct available links between news desert conditions and accountability failure in the Nigerian context.

Several confounding variables must be acknowledged. The North-West's governance crisis involves state capture, weak security infrastructure, political dysfunction, and poverty, factors that would constrain civic engagement even in the presence of functioning local newspapers. The paper does not claim that newspaper decline caused the Bandit crisis or that its presence would have resolved it. The claim is more modest: that the absence of local journalism has removed an institutional mechanism for community voice, accountability documentation, and civic information that would, on the evidence of the theoretical framework and comparative literature, reduce civic engagement capacity in conditions where all other factors are equal, and that in the North-West, this absence compounds pre-existing civic deficits in ways that are analytically traceable.

6.2 Case B: The Nigerian Tribune and Survival Through Compromise

The Nigerian Tribune, founded in Ibadan in 1949 by Obafemi Awolowo, represents an instructive case of partial institutional adaptation. The paper has survived where contemporaries have not through revenue diversification, digital transition, and a legacy institutional prestige that insulates it partially from pure market forces. It maintains a digital platform (tribuneonline.ng.com) that attracts diaspora readership from Yoruba communities in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada, a revenue stream through digital advertising and content licensing that is unavailable to papers with weaker brand identities. It has entered into supplement and advertising partnerships with South-West state governments, providing commercially structured but politically sensitive revenue.

The Tribune's audience profile, the best available evidence for which comes from advertiser surveys

published by MediaReach OMD Nigeria (2021), which tracks print readership across Nigerian markets for advertising planning purposes, indicates concentration among urban, educated, older readers in Ibadan, Lagos, and the South-West state capitals. Rural and semi-urban audiences, and readers below the age of thirty-five, are substantially underrepresented relative to the Tribune's historical catchment. This audience profile is not independently verified by the present paper and should be treated as indicative rather than definitive; it represents the strongest available substitute for primary audience data in the absence of commissioned survey research.

The civic costs of the Tribune's survival strategy are, from the perspective of the integrated framework, instructive. The paper's political accommodation with South-West state governments creates editorial constraints that compromise its counterpublic function in the region, it is not a captured state organ, but its financial relationship with state governments limits the depth of critical reporting on those governments. Its digital-first orientation extends its reach to audiences already connected and already civically engaged; it does not serve the communities most dependent on local news. The Tribune's case thus illustrates a general principle: institutional survival achieved through editorial accommodation and audience repositioning preserves the form of local journalism while substantially altering its civic substance.

6.3 Case C: Plateau State as a Multi-Dimensional News Desert

Plateau State in Nigeria's North-Central zone provides the paper's most comprehensive illustration of news desert conditions and their civic consequences. The state's significant ethno-religious diversity and history of communal conflict between farming and herding communities make it a particularly important case for analysing all three dimensions of the paper's civic framework, watchdog, electoral information, and community identity.

The Plateau Publishing Corporation's Sunday Standard and its daily edition were effectively non-functional by 2010, according to the CJID's (2019) field assessment, which documented unpaid staff, non-functioning printing equipment, and buildings in disrepair. The CJID assessment is a primary source document produced through field visits, interviews with former staff, and physical inspection of facilities; it is not inferred. In the absence of local print journalism, coverage of Plateau State's communal conflicts has been provided primarily by national

journalists parachuting into the state during acute crises and departing thereafter. The structural causes of conflict, the grievances of affected communities, and accountability failures of local government in responding to displacement have received minimal sustained reporting.

The electoral accountability dimension is documented by Omotola's (2010) analysis of SIEC operations across Nigerian states, which identifies Plateau State as among those where LGA elections have been conducted with minimal independent observation. While Omotola's study predates the period of complete newspaper collapse and cannot be directly attributed to newspaper absence, it establishes the baseline condition of SIEC opacity that, in the absence of local journalistic scrutiny, has persisted without institutional challenge. The CJID (2019) assessment further noted that no civil society organisation in rural Plateau LGAs had the capacity to perform the monitoring functions historically associated with local journalism, a finding that speaks directly to the social capital dimension of the integrated framework.

Cross-case synthesis from the three studies suggests several consistent patterns. First, the civic functions most immediately and demonstrably affected by newspaper decline are those requiring sustained institutional presence, LGA budget monitoring, regular court and legislature reporting, and ongoing documentation of community affairs, rather than those requiring occasional mobilisation, which partisan and ethnic networks can supply. Second, the communities most severely affected are those with fewest alternative information resources, rural communities, ethnic minorities, and communities in security-compromised zones. Third, in all three cases, digital alternatives have not filled the specific civic gaps created by newspaper decline, for reasons analysed in Section 7.

7. Digital Media as Substitute? A Critical Assessment

7.1 The Promise of Digital Alternatives

The emergence of digital media in Nigeria has generated genuine optimism in media studies scholarship and journalism development practice. Smartphone penetration was estimated at approximately 45 percent of the adult population by the Nigerian Communications Commission (2023). Internet access, estimated at approximately 37 percent by the ITU (2023), is a distinct metric: the NCC figure reflects device ownership while the ITU figure reflects active data connectivity, explaining the apparent

discrepancy. Both figures indicate substantial and growing connectivity, concentrated in urban areas and among the educated. Youth-led digital journalism ventures, HumAngle, which covers security and humanitarian issues in conflict-affected regions with notable rigour, and the Foundation for Investigative Journalism, represent genuine contributions to the Nigerian information ecosystem.

Community Facebook groups have in some urban contexts performed local information functions: sharing information about services, governance failures, and community events. WhatsApp broadcast channels distribute civic information at low data cost. These developments deserve recognition as meaningful, if imperfect, adaptations to print collapse, particularly in contexts where urban communities with existing social capital networks can leverage digital tools to sustain civic communication.

7.2 Structural Reasons Digital Cannot Fill the Civic Gap

Despite these contributions, the structural case for digital media as an adequate substitute for local newspapers in civic terms is weak on multiple grounds. The digital divide remains the primary obstacle. The communities most dependent on local newspapers, rural communities in the North-West, North-East, and North-Central zones, low-income urban communities, and communities with low literacy rates, are precisely those with the weakest digital connectivity. The ITU's (2023) data for Nigeria shows internet penetration below fifteen percent in the North-West and North-East zones. To assert that digital media substitutes for local print in these contexts is to mistake the media consumption patterns of Lagos's middle class for a national average.

The editorial economics of digital journalism reinforce this inadequacy. Digital advertising revenue rewards platforms that maximise engagement, a metric served by national, sensational, or emotionally resonant content rather than by meticulous reporting of LGA budget hearings or state assembly proceedings. The incentive structures of digital journalism systematically under-produce the civic content that local newspapers, whatever their limitations, historically provided. HumAngle and the Foundation for Investigative Journalism are significant institutions, but both are funded primarily by international development grants, a revenue model that is simultaneously crucial and structurally fragile, dependent on the shifting priorities of foreign donors rather than the informational needs of Nigerian communities.

The misinformation problem warrants sustained analytical attention. The same WhatsApp infrastructure that distributes genuine local news distributes fabricated information, manipulated images, and inflammatory content at identical velocity and with equivalent visual authority. In Nigeria's communal conflict contexts, the circulation of misinformation through informal digital channels has been directly implicated in violence: Dubawa's (2022) annual misinformation report documented forty-seven verified cases in 2022 in which false information circulated on social media contributed to communal violence, property destruction, or displacement. Functioning local newspapers, for all their imperfections, operated within editorial frameworks that imposed nominal checks on unverified information. The replacement of institutional journalism by informal digital channels thus not only fails to replicate the civic function of local newspapers but actively degrades the informational environment through which civic engagement must operate.

7.3 The Institutional Dimension of Print

There is a final argument for the non-substitutability of local newspapers that deserves theoretical development rather than summary treatment: the argument from institutional properties. A newspaper is not merely a distribution channel for information. It is an institution with a physical presence in the community, an editorial staff embedded in local social networks, a legal identity that can be held accountable for defamation and subject to regulatory oversight, an address to which letters and complaints can be sent, and an archive that creates a documentary record of community life accessible in perpetuity.

Carlson (2015) and Schudson (2011) have argued that the authority of journalism derives not only from the quality of individual pieces but from the institutional framework within which they are produced. Audiences invest trust in news sources partly because they are recognisable institutions with reputations to protect, histories to defend, and legal obligations to meet. The informal digital information channels that have partially replaced local newspapers in many Nigerian communities lack these institutional properties and operate in conditions of endemic credibility crisis. This distinction is not merely sociological; it has direct civic consequences. When a local newspaper reported that a state legislator had misused constituency funds, that report carried institutional weight capable of triggering political response, legal action, or civic mobilisation. When the same allegation circulates on a WhatsApp group, it is

functionally indistinguishable from rumour, its civic mobilisation potential is radically reduced.

The archival function deserves specific mention in the Nigerian context. Local newspapers served as historical records of community life, documenting governance decisions, community events, and social changes in ways that created an accountable documentary trail. The loss of this archival function is not merely cultural; it is civic. Communities that lack documentary records of past governance decisions, past electoral results, and past official commitments are communities without the informational resources to hold officials accountable across time. Digital content is ephemeral, platform-dependent, and subject to deletion; newspaper archives are physically permanent and institutionally maintained.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Research Priorities

Before turning to policy and industry recommendations, the paper foregrounds a research priority that follows directly from its acknowledged methodological limitations. The causal mechanisms proposed in this paper, between local newspaper decline and specific dimensions of civic disengagement, require testing through primary empirical research. The most valuable contribution that future scholars could make would be a mixed-methods study combining: a survey-based measurement of civic engagement across communities with and without functioning local newspapers, controlling for alternative explanations including income, education, urbanisation, and ethnic diversity; semi-structured interviews with local journalists, civil society practitioners, LGA officials, and community leaders in the case study areas; and a longitudinal analysis tracking civic engagement indicators before and after newspaper closures in specific communities. Until such research is conducted, the causal claims of this paper should be treated as theoretically grounded hypotheses rather than empirically established findings.

8.2 Policy-Level Interventions

The structural decline of local newspapers in Nigeria is not simply a market failure; it is a democratic governance failure that warrants policy intervention. Nigerian federal and state governments should develop a framework for independent community journalism funding analogous to subsidy models operating in Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands. It is acknowledged that this recommendation confronts

significant structural obstacles: Nigerian state actors have historically demonstrated neither the political will nor the institutional capacity to fund journalism independently of political control, and the very governments most in need of journalistic scrutiny are those with the greatest incentive to control or defund it. The recommendation is accordingly conditioned: any subsidy framework must be administered through an arm's-length independent body, constituted through civil society, professional associations, and independent trustees, with statutory protection from ministerial interference. Without this structural condition, journalism subsidy risks funding institutional mouthpieces rather than civic organs.

Press freedom reform is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of any subsidy regime. The Nigerian government's use of the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, particularly Section 24, which has been used repeatedly to criminalise online criticism of public officials, creates a regulatory environment in which local journalism cannot safely perform its watchdog function. The National Assembly should amend the Cybercrime Act to remove provisions inconsistent with constitutional freedom of expression guarantees, and state governments should repeal analogous state-level legislation.

8.3 Alternative Ownership and Revenue Models

Structural dependence on advertising and government patronage has proven catastrophically unstable for Nigerian local newspapers. Nonprofit and cooperative ownership structures, in which editorial control is vested in community trusts, professional associations, or reader cooperatives rather than commercial shareholders or government ministries, are the most practically actionable near-term recommendation, precisely because their implementation does not require government action. University journalism departments are particularly well-positioned as institutional anchors for such ventures: they can provide editorial expertise, training infrastructure, and institutional credibility, while community newspapers provide practicum environments for students. The International Press Centre Lagos has piloted elements of this model; a systematic evaluation of its outcomes would provide an evidence base for scaling.

Revenue diversification must accompany ownership reform. Events journalism, community fora, governance town halls, civic education workshops, represents a revenue stream that aligns commercial incentive with civic function. Structured data journalism services, producing accessible visual representations of LGA budget data and SIEC election

results, create value for civil society organisations that may be willing to fund production. These models do not guarantee sustainability, but they reduce dependence on the advertising and state patronage streams that have proven most destructive of editorial independence.

8.4 Civil Society, Institutional Coordination, and Research

The Nigerian Union of Journalists, the Newspaper Proprietors Association of Nigeria, and media development organisations operating in Nigeria, including the International Press Centre, the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development, and the Nigeria Media Foundation, should coordinate a national audit of local and community newspaper status. The absence of reliable data on the number of operational community newspapers, their circulation, editorial independence, and ownership structures represent a significant empirical gap that constrains evidence-based policy. The CJID's state-level assessments provide a methodological model; national coverage and regular updating would substantially improve the evidence base.

8.5 Digital-Print Hybrid Models

Viable local newspapers need not choose between print and digital; hybrid models that leverage the institutional authority of print while using digital distribution to extend reach represent the most promising near-term innovation pathway. WhatsApp newsletters, brief, editorially produced summaries of local governance news, distributed through WhatsApp broadcast channels, represent a low-bandwidth, high-penetration mechanism for extending civic content to audiences without reliable internet access. Structured data journalism distributed through low-data websites and downloadable PDF formats extends reach to communities with intermittent connectivity. These models have been piloted by several Nigerian media development practitioners with promising results; systematic evaluation and documentation of their civic impact represent a priority for the media development research community.

9. Conclusion

This paper has made a qualified but substantive argument: the decline of local newspapers in Nigeria has dismantled civic infrastructure whose loss is felt most severely by the communities least able to compensate for it. The integrated theoretical framework constructed in Section 2, synthesising agenda-setting theory, Fraser's subaltern counterpublic

concept, and Putnam's social capital model, identifies three specific mechanisms through which local newspaper decline translates into civic disengagement: the collapse of the watchdog function and its accountability consequences, the erosion of voter information environments, and the fragmentation of community identity and social capital. The three structured case studies in Section 6 illustrate these mechanisms in contexts that span geopolitical zones, ownership types, and crisis conditions, and the cross-case synthesis identifies consistent patterns that support the theoretical framework.

The paper has been explicit about the limits of its evidence and methodology. It argues by mechanism and analogy, establishing the plausibility and theoretical coherence of causal connections rather than demonstrating those connections through large-N quantitative analysis or experimental design. The distinction between causal mechanism and causal proof is not a cosmetic caveat; it reflects a genuine epistemological commitment to intellectual honesty about what qualitative historical and case study methods can and cannot establish. The paper's contribution is to construct the theoretical architecture for a causal argument, ground it in the best available evidence for the Nigerian context, and provide a research agenda for the primary empirical work that would test it.

The critical assessment of digital substitution in Section 7 challenges the optimistic narrative that new media has resolved the problem of local journalism decline. The digital divide remains profound in the communities most dependent on local news. Digital editorial incentives systematically under-produce civic content. Informal digital channels lack the institutional properties, archival authority, legal accountability, editorial standards, that gave local newspapers their civic weight. And in Nigeria's conflict-affected communities, the replacement of institutional journalism by informal digital channels has actively degraded the informational environment through misinformation proliferation.

The recommendations advanced in Section 8 address the structural dimensions of the problem across policy, industry, civil society, and research domains. Their implementation requires political will, institutional innovation, and research investment that have not been forthcoming. The paper is not naively optimistic about the prospects for rapid change. It does, however, insist on the democratic stakes of the problem. Nigeria's democracy is contested, fragile, and uneven in its distribution of civic rights and capacities. The

institutions that make democracy substantive rather than merely procedural, those that provide citizens with the information, the voice, and the institutional connections necessary to hold power accountable, are being systematically hollowed out by the decline of local journalism. The communities experiencing this hollowing out most acutely are those already most marginalised from official power: rural, poor, ethnically minority, and geographically peripheral. The civic deficit created by local media decline is not evenly distributed; it deepens existing inequalities of voice and representation in ways that compound across time.

To reconstruct these institutions is not a media industry project. It is a democratic project, and it deserves to be named as one. The scholarly contribution of this paper is to provide the theoretical framework, historical context, and structured empirical evidence that such naming requires.

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