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Mass Media Content Commercialisation and the Paradox of Objectivity

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Abstract

The increasing commercialization of mass media content has generated sustained scholarly concern regarding its implications for journalistic objectivity and democratic communication. This paper examined the relationship between media content commercialisation and the paradox of objectivity within the Nigerian media environment. Specifically, the study explored the concept of mass media content commercialisation, interrogated the paradox of objectivity in journalism, and analysed the implications of commercialisation for journalistic objectivity in Nigeria. The paper adopted a qualitative approach based on extensive review and critical analysis of relevant scholarly literature and contemporary media practices. The discussion was anchored on Social Responsibility Theory and Political Economy Theory, which respectively explain journalism's ethical obligations and the structural economic forces influencing media content. The paper found that although commercialisation has become indispensable for the financial sustainability of media organisations, it increasingly shapes editorial decisions through dependence on advertising, political sponsorship, ownership influence, and market competition. These pressures encourage practices such as sponsored news, advertorials, brown envelope journalism and sensational reporting, thereby weakening editorial independence, reducing public trust and undermining democratic accountability. The researchers conclude that the paradox of objectivity arises from the persistent tension between journalism's public service obligation and the commercial realities of contemporary media practice. It recommends stronger ethical enforcement, improved journalists' welfare, clearer separation between editorial and commercial operations, greater investment in public-interest journalism and enhanced media literacy as essential measures for preserving journalistic objectivity within Nigeria's evolving media landscape.

Keywords: Media ethics; Editorial independence; Commercial journalism; News commodification; Democratic accountability.



Introduction

Mass media constitute one of the most influential institutions in contemporary society, serving as indispensable channels for the dissemination of information, education, entertainment, and public enlightenment. Through newspapers, radio, television, magazines, and digital communication platforms, the media shape public opinion, facilitate civic engagement, and contribute significantly to socio-political and economic development (McQuail, 2010; Baran, 2022). Within democratic societies, the media are traditionally regarded as watchdogs of government and other institutions, promoting transparency, accountability, and informed public discourse (Ward, 2019). To perform these responsibilities effectively, journalism is expected to uphold the professional ideals of objectivity, fairness, balance, accuracy, and truthfulness.

Notwithstanding these normative expectations, the contemporary media industry operates within an increasingly competitive economic environment that demands financial sustainability (Picard, 2011; Doyle, 2021). Rising production costs, declining public funding, technological disruption, and intense competition for audiences have compelled many media organisations to depend heavily on advertising, sponsorships, paid programming, political patronage, and other commercial sources of revenue. Although these mechanisms provide the financial resources necessary for organisational survival, they also introduce commercial pressures capable of influencing editorial decisions and redefining news values in ways that may conflict with the fundamental principles of professional journalism.

The increasing commercialization of media content has consequently generated one of the most enduring debates in media and communication scholarship. As commercial interests become more deeply embedded in media operations, concerns continue to grow over the extent to which financial considerations shape news selection, framing, and presentation. In many instances, the pursuit of profit has encouraged practices such as sponsored news, advertorials presented as editorial content, sensational reporting, and politically influenced coverage, thereby raising important questions about the credibility, independence, and social responsibility of the press.

These developments have given rise to what scholars describe as the paradox of objectivity—the inherent tension between journalism's ethical obligation to provide impartial, balanced, and truthful information and the commercial realities that increasingly influence media practice. Although media organisations are expected to serve the public interest, they are simultaneously required to operate as viable business enterprises within highly competitive markets. This dual responsibility often creates situations in which commercial imperatives compete with professional ethics, making the attainment of complete objectivity increasingly difficult in contemporary journalism.

The Nigeria media system presents a significant context for examining this paradox. The commercialisation of media content has become increasingly evident across print, broadcast, and digital media through practices such as paid news, brown envelope journalism, sponsored political programming, and ownership influence on editorial content. While these practices have contributed to the financial sustainability of many media organisations, they have also generated widespread concerns regarding media credibility, public trust, and democratic accountability. Against this backdrop, this paper critically examines the phenomenon of mass media content commercialization and its implications for the paradox of objectivity, with particular emphasis on media practice in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper examines the concept of mass media content commercialisation, interrogates the paradox of objectivity in Nigerian journalism, and analyses the implications of commercialisation for journalistic objectivity in Nigeria. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on how commercial imperatives continue to reshape ethical journalism and democratic communication in emerging media systems.



Conceptual Clarification

Mass Media

Mass media constitute the organised channels through which information, ideas, opinions and cultural values are communicated simultaneously to large, diverse and geographically dispersed audiences. Traditionally, the concept encompasses newspapers, magazines, radio, television and film, while contemporary understandings extend it to digital platforms, online news outlets and other internet-based communication systems. Beyond their technological functions, the mass media serve as important social institutions that shape public opinion, facilitate political participation, transmit cultural values and support national development. McQuail (2010) conceptualises the mass media as organised communication systems that perform surveillance of the environment, correlation of societal responses, cultural transmission, entertainment and mobilisation. Similarly, Baran and Davis (2022) argue that the media function not merely as channels of communication but as influential institutions that construct social reality by determining which issues receive public attention and how those issues are interpreted.

Within democratic societies, the mass media occupy a unique position as the "Fourth Estate" because they provide citizens with information necessary for informed decision-making while serving as watchdogs over governments, corporations and other centres of power. This normative responsibility places significant ethical obligations upon journalists to ensure that information disseminated to the public remains accurate, balanced, fair and objective. However, contemporary media organisations also function as economic enterprises operating within highly competitive markets where profitability and sustainability increasingly shape editorial decisions. As ownership structures, technological innovations and commercial competition continue to transform the media landscape, the traditional public service role of the media has become increasingly intertwined with commercial imperatives. This growing convergence between journalism and commerce provides the broader context within which debates surrounding media commercialisation and journalistic objectivity have become increasingly significant (Ward & Wasserman, 2010; McQuail, 2010).

Content Commercialisation

Content commercialisation refers to the transformation of media content from a public service commodity into an economic product intended to generate revenue and sustain media operations. It involves the incorporation of commercial interests into editorial processes through sponsored news, paid interviews, advertorials, branded content, political sponsorships and other forms of paid media exposure. Consequently, editorial decisions increasingly reflect financial considerations alongside public interest and professional ethics. Ngantem and Dapiya (2017) describe news commercialisation as the infiltration of commercial interests into journalism in ways that weaken fairness, balance and objectivity. Similarly, Picard (2011) notes that media organisations increasingly operate within market-driven environments where audience attention and advertising revenue influence editorial priorities.

Although commercialisation provides resources for acquiring technology, employing professionals and sustaining media operations, it also creates ethical and professional challenges. Dependence on advertising and corporate sponsorship may encourage media organisations to prioritise commercially attractive content over public-interest issues, increasing sensationalism, entertainment-oriented programming and paid news. In Nigeria, economic instability, declining government subventions and political patronage have further encouraged practices such as brown envelope journalism and sponsored political reporting. Consequently, commercialisation is increasingly viewed as a threat to media independence because it shifts journalism from its public-service mandate towards profit-oriented communication (Oloyede et al., 2024; Sanusi et al., 2025).

Media Objectivity



Media objectivity refers to the professional ideal requiring journalists to gather, verify and present information fairly, accurately, impartially and independently, without allowing personal opinions, political affiliations or external interests to influence editorial judgement. It requires balanced representation of competing viewpoints, factual accuracy and fairness in news production. Objectivity remains a fundamental ethical principle because it promotes public confidence and enhances the credibility of media institutions. McQuail (2010) identifies factual accuracy, impartiality, neutrality and balance as key dimensions of objectivity, while Ward (2018) argues that objectivity does not imply complete absence of human judgement but rather a disciplined commitment to evidence, transparency and fairness.

However, objectivity remains contested because absolute neutrality is difficult to achieve. Decisions concerning news selection, framing, sourcing and presentation inevitably involve human judgement influenced by professional routines, organisational policies, ownership interests and socio-political contexts. In Nigeria, these challenges are intensified by commercial pressures, political ownership and economic vulnerabilities. Ajilore et al, (2012) identify ownership structures and commercial interests as major threats to journalistic objectivity, while Okandeji (2024) notes that increasing news commercialisation continues to weaken journalists' ability to maintain professional neutrality. Thus, contemporary scholarship increasingly views objectivity not as an absolute condition but as a professional ideal requiring continuous ethical commitment despite commercial and institutional pressures.

Theoretical Framework

Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility Theory was formally articulated by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in 1956, building on the earlier work of the Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947). The theory assumes that press freedom is inseparable from social responsibility and that journalists must uphold fairness, impartiality, independence, accuracy and accountability while serving the public interest. Although commercial activities may support media sustainability, economic interests should not override professional ethics or public responsibility. The theory is relevant to this study because it provides a normative basis for examining the tension between media content commercialisation and journalistic objectivity. It explains how commercial pressures that encourage sensationalism, loss of credibility, public distrust and ethical compromise can conflict with the media's responsibility to society. Thus, the theory provides an ethical framework for assessing the implications of commercialisation for responsible journalism in Nigeria.

Political Economy Theory

Political Economy Theory traces its intellectual roots to Karl Marx and was developed within media and communication studies through scholars such as Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller and Vincent Mosco, whose *Political Economy of Communication* provided a major exposition. The theory assumes that media institutions are shaped by the political and economic structures within which they operate, particularly ownership, capital, advertising, market competition and profit motives. It views media organisations as both public institutions and commercial enterprises, suggesting that the pursuit of profit can transform information into a commodity and influence editorial priorities. The theory is relevant to this study because it explains the structural and economic forces underlying media content commercialisation in Nigeria, particularly ownership interests, advertising dependence, political sponsorship and market pressures. It therefore provides a framework for understanding how these forces may influence editorial independence, journalistic objectivity, public trust and democratic accountability.



Method

This paper adopted a qualitative desk research design. It relied on a critical review and analysis of relevant scholarly literature and contemporary media practices relating to mass media commercialisation and journalistic objectivity. Relevant literature was purposively selected, thematically reviewed, synthesised and interpreted in relation to the study's objectives and theoretical perspectives.

Discussion

Mass Media Content Commercialisation

Mass media content commercialisation refers to the process whereby media content is treated as a commodity for economic gain. News, programmes and editorial spaces become marketable products purchased by individuals, corporations, religious organisations and political actors through sponsored news, paid interviews, advertorials, political sponsorships and purchased airtime. Ngantem and Dapiya (2017) describe news commercialisation as the infiltration of commercial interests into journalism, transforming it from a public-service enterprise into one increasingly driven by economic interests. In Nigeria, this is evident in sponsored news, paid interviews, advertorials disguised as news and political propaganda.

The emergence of media commercialisation in Nigeria was closely associated with changes in the country's political economy. According to Akpan (2026), commercialisation and government control have become dominant forces shaping Nigerian broadcasting. Initially, broadcasting functioned primarily as a social service financed through government subventions, while advertising was discouraged because it was considered inconsistent with developmental and nation-building responsibilities. This changed with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in 1986, which drastically reduced government funding and compelled media organisations to seek alternative revenue sources. During the late 1980s and 1990s, the Technical Committee on Privatisation and Commercialisation (TCPC) further entrenched commercialisation by promoting the partial and full commercialisation of public enterprises, including state-owned media organisations. The deregulation of broadcasting through Decree No. 38 of 1992 subsequently opened the industry to private ownership, increased competition and strengthened market-driven operations (Out, 2006; Udejah, 2004).

The post-deregulation period witnessed rapid expansion of public and private broadcasting stations. However, declining government subventions and rising operational costs have compelled broadcasters to depend increasingly on commercial revenue for survival (Akpan, 2025). Consequently, owners, advertisers and sponsors increasingly influence media content and editorial decisions, making commercialisation a defining feature of contemporary Nigerian media practice.

Commercialisation manifests through sponsored news, advertorials, political sponsorship, paid interviews and entertainment programming. During elections, politicians purchase programmes, interviews and media coverage to influence public opinion. Reality television programmes such as *Big Brother Naija* and *Nigerian Idol* similarly rely heavily on sponsorship, advertising and audience engagement. In the digital environment, clickbait journalism uses sensational headlines to attract online traffic and advertising revenue. Brown envelope journalism, involving cash or material inducements in exchange for favourable coverage or suppression of negative information, is another prominent manifestation. Poor remuneration, inadequate welfare, weak regulatory enforcement and difficult economic conditions contribute to the practice. Religious organisations also purchase substantial broadcast airtime for sponsored programmes, further demonstrating the commercialisation of media content.



Several factors sustain this development. Economic survival remains central because media organisations require resources for salaries, equipment and programme production. Declining government funding has intensified the search for alternative revenue, while competition for audiences, advertisers and market share further encourages commercialisation. Ownership influence also enables proprietors to promote political and business interests through editorial decisions. Technological developments have intensified competition for audience attention and advertising revenue, thereby reinforcing market-oriented content production.

The manifestations of commercialisation are particularly evident in Nigerian political communication. During elections, financially powerful candidates may secure preferential airtime and extensive coverage. A contemporary example is the monthly media chat organised by the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, Mr Nyesom Wike, and broadcast simultaneously on several frontline television stations through purchased airtime. Such arrangements demonstrate how financial capacity can increasingly determine access to media visibility.

Overall, media commercialisation has evolved from a supplementary revenue-generating strategy into a defining feature of Nigerian media practice. Economic pressures, competition, technological change and ownership interests increasingly shape the production, packaging and distribution of content across traditional and digital platforms. Political Economy Theory explains this development through ownership structures, market competition, advertising dependence and capitalist pressures, while Social Responsibility Theory emphasises that financial sustainability should not override the media's obligation to serve the public interest. Together, the theories explain why commercialisation remains entrenched despite its implications for professional journalism and editorial responsibility.

The Paradox of Objectivity in Journalism

The paradox of objectivity in journalism remains a central debate because journalism is expected to provide truthful, fair, balanced and objective information while operating as a commercial enterprise. The mass media are traditionally expected to inform, educate and hold authorities accountable, yet their survival depends substantially on revenue and profitability. Media organisations therefore negotiate between financial viability and professional ethics, public interest and trust. This tension constitutes the paradox of objectivity: journalism must serve the public impartially while functioning within institutional structures that may reward commercially advantageous decisions.

At the centre of this paradox is media content commercialisation, through which news is treated as a commodity or financial inducements influence editorial coverage. Instead of allowing editorial decisions to rest solely on public interest and professional judgement, commercialisation introduces financial considerations into news production. As commercial pressures intensify, those who finance media operations may influence editorial priorities, creating circumstances in which economic survival competes with truthful and impartial reporting. Commercial relationships do not automatically produce unethical journalism, but they create conditions in which financial interests can shape editorial judgement and make complete independence increasingly difficult.

The contradiction is particularly evident in the relationship between truth and profit. Journalism traditionally informs and educates citizens while holding governments, institutions and individuals accountable. However, where news production depends on sponsorship, advertorials or financial inducements, editorial content becomes vulnerable to subjective influence. Media organisations may respond more readily to those who sustain them financially than to the informational needs of the wider public. The resulting tension makes neutrality difficult to sustain and creates circumstances in which profit competes with journalism's normative commitment to independent, public-interest reporting.



A visible manifestation is the “pay-to-play” effect, whereby wealthy individuals, politicians and corporate organisations acquire greater capacity to influence the news agenda because they can purchase visibility or favourable coverage. Public-interest stories may consequently receive less attention than commercially rewarding ones, while financially powerful actors gain disproportionate access to media visibility. The expression “*he who pays the piper calls the tune*” captures this relationship, illustrating how financial power can determine whose voices are amplified. Such practices depart from journalism’s obligation to prioritise issues according to public significance rather than the financial capacity of interested actors.

The historical development of modern journalism shows how commercial pressures became embedded in media practice. Early newspapers depended substantially on subscriptions and political patronage, but industrialisation and technological development strengthened advertising as a principal revenue source. Advertising supported financial sustainability and media expansion, yet introduced pressures capable of affecting editorial independence. As dependence on advertising increased, journalism and commerce became increasingly intertwined, establishing conditions that continue to shape contemporary editorial practice. The historical trajectory therefore shows that tension between journalism’s public-service role and commercial character is longstanding, although technological and economic changes have intensified its present manifestations.

Commercialisation also weakens journalism’s gate-keeping function. Journalists and editors are expected to determine what deserves public attention according to newsworthiness, relevance and public interest. Commercial considerations may instead encourage favourable coverage of sponsors while discouraging stories that could damage advertisers, political patrons or financial benefactors. Editorial judgement consequently shifts from social significance towards economic expediency. Such interference weakens editorial independence and compromises the media’s democratic responsibility to provide accurate, balanced and comprehensive information. When financial interests influence what enters or remains outside the news agenda, gate-keeping becomes partly an economic calculation rather than solely a professional judgement.

The erosion of editorial independence has implications for public trust. Media organisations that publish commercialised material, sometimes described as “*puff pieces*”, risk damaging credibility because audiences may question whether information reflects genuine journalistic judgement or commercial motivation. Once financial interests become visibly intertwined with editorial decisions, even legitimate investigative reports may attract suspicion. Credibility built over years can therefore deteriorate when audiences struggle to distinguish independent journalism from promotional content. Commercialisation consequently threatens not only professional ethics but also public confidence, which remains one of journalism’s most valuable institutional assets.

The paradox is further complicated by the difficulty of achieving absolute objectivity even without commercial pressure. Objectivity has been described as a “**strategic ritual**” through which journalists use professional routines to minimise personal bias, although complete neutrality remains difficult. Every stage of news production involves judgement, from deciding which events qualify as newsworthy to selecting sources, representing voices and framing issues. Such decisions may reflect professional experience, personal values and institutional priorities. Objectivity is therefore better understood as a professional aspiration pursued through established practices than as an absolute condition. Commercialisation adds another layer of influence to these unavoidable processes of human and institutional judgement.

The structural vulnerability of journalists intensifies this paradox. Poor salaries, delayed remuneration, inadequate incentives and weak professional motivation can make practitioners more susceptible to financial inducements from news sources and interested parties. Ethical vulnerability may therefore arise not only from individual moral failure but also from structural weaknesses within media organisations.



Journalists struggling to meet economic needs may find inappropriate financial relationships harder to resist. Poor welfare conditions can consequently reinforce news commercialisation and complicate professional independence. The economic conditions surrounding journalism are therefore part of the institutional environment within which objectivity is negotiated.

Contemporary journalism consequently involves an institutional contradiction between professional expectations and organisational realities. Journalists are expected to remain neutral, fair and independent while working in organisations whose survival may depend on advertisers, sponsors, political patronage and commercial partnerships. Okandeji (2024) similarly posits that commercialised news environments often exhibit lower levels of objectivity. The issue is therefore not simply whether individual journalists possess ethical commitment, but whether organisational structures allow that commitment to be consistently exercised. Objectivity becomes an ongoing negotiation between professional responsibility and commercial necessity.

Several factors sustain this contradiction, particularly advertising dependence and ownership influence. Advertisers may exert direct or subtle pressure to ensure that media content does not threaten their commercial interests, while proprietors may shape editorial policies around personal, political or economic preferences. Ownership can consequently become a mechanism through which political and business elites influence public discourse. The combined effects of advertising dependence and concentrated ownership make editorial independence difficult because media organisations must remain attentive to those providing financial resources or exercising institutional authority. Profitability and ownership interests can therefore become embedded within editorial decisions that should ideally be guided by newsworthiness and public importance.

Commercialisation also distorts newsworthiness. Ideally, gate-keeping should prioritise events according to significance, social relevance and the public's right to know. Commercial pressures may instead favour stories capable of attracting audiences, generating advertising revenue or satisfying commercial partners. Consequently, *soft news* involving entertainment, celebrity lifestyles and sensational events may receive greater prominence than *hard news* concerning governance, public policy, accountability and development. This shift can restrict citizens' access to information necessary for informed democratic participation. The commercial value of news therefore becomes an important determinant of editorial attention, altering traditional journalistic priorities.

Commercial influence also reaches journalism's ethical foundations. Accuracy, fairness, balance and independence become harder to maintain when financial considerations shape editorial decisions. Paid stories may exaggerate or distort information, while commercial relationships can encourage one-sided reporting that gives insufficient space to opposing perspectives. Journalists financially dependent on sources may equally lose the independence needed to scrutinise them. In Nigeria, this problem is particularly evident in brown envelope journalism, involving money, gifts or material inducements from newsmakers in exchange for favourable coverage or suppression of unfavourable reports. Such practices compromise editorial independence, distort public perception and weaken the watchdog role. Sanusi et al. (2025) similarly reported that commercialisation negatively affects media independence and public trust.

The problem is reinforced by journalists' economic vulnerability. In many public and private media organisations, practitioners face inadequate salaries, delayed or irregular payment, poor incentives and limited professional motivation. These conditions can increase susceptibility to inducements and encourage practices that compromise editorial integrity. The issue therefore extends beyond individual ethics to the structural conditions of journalism. Where practitioners are inadequately supported, supplementing income through inappropriate relationships with news sources may become more tempting. Maintaining objectivity consequently requires attention not only to ethical codes but also to welfare conditions that shape journalists' capacity to uphold them.



Political interference and ownership concentration constitute further obstacles, particularly in Nigeria's politically charged media environment. Media ownership is often associated with politicians and politically exposed individuals whose economic and political interests may influence editorial content. Organisations operating under such conditions can face pressure to align coverage with the preferences of owners, sponsors or political actors. Ajilore et al. (2012) similarly argued that ownership and commercial pressures significantly threaten objectivity in Nigerian journalism. When editorial independence becomes subordinate to proprietorial or political interests, neutral, balanced and non-partisan reporting becomes more difficult. Ownership is therefore both an economic issue and a potential source of influence over public discourse.

Technological transformation introduces further complications through citizen journalism and artificial intelligence. Smartphones and internet access have democratised information production, but also facilitated misinformation, disinformation, unverifiable user-generated content and deepfakes that blur professional journalism and unverified material. Artificial intelligence has made manipulation of visual, audio and textual content more accessible, increasing uncertainty about authenticity. Audience polarisation and confirmation bias add another pressure as consumers gravitate towards outlets reinforcing existing beliefs. To sustain patronage, some organisations tailor coverage to these preferences, prioritising engagement over balanced reporting. Technology therefore expands access to information while simultaneously creating new challenges for credibility and objectivity.

Weak regulatory enforcement compounds these pressures. Although regulatory institutions exist to promote ethical journalism and professional accountability, political influence, institutional weakness and inconsistent enforcement may limit their effectiveness. Politically influential proprietors may exercise considerable influence within regulatory environments, reducing effective sanctions for unethical practices. The twenty-four-hour news cycle adds pressure by prioritising speed in a competitive information environment. The demand to publish breaking stories can encourage inadequate verification, hurried reporting and reliance on unverified sources. Inobemhe et al. (2024) therefore observed that commercialisation remains widespread because media organisations continue to prioritise institutional survival and profit. Speed, competition and weak accountability consequently complicate accuracy, fairness and objectivity.

The paradox is therefore sustained by interacting economic, political, technological and professional pressures rather than commercialisation alone. Advertising dependence, ownership interests, poor remuneration, political interference, brown envelope practices, audience polarisation, technological manipulation, weak regulation and pressure for speed can all interfere with objective reporting. Yet these pressures do not eliminate objectivity as a professional ideal. Instead, they demonstrate the difficulty of maintaining that ideal within media organisations whose survival depends on financial and political realities. Contemporary journalism must therefore preserve accuracy, fairness, balance and independence while operating within an increasingly competitive and commercially dependent information environment.

The paradox of objectivity is theoretically understood through the complementary assumptions of Social Responsibility Theory and Political Economy Theory. Social Responsibility Theory maintains that journalists have professional obligations to uphold truthfulness, fairness, balance, independence and objectivity while serving the public interest. Political Economy Theory draws attention to the economic and political structures within which media organisations operate, particularly ownership, advertising, revenue dependence and commercial survival. Together, the theories illuminate the contradiction: journalists are expected to uphold professional ethics while working within structures that may influence editorial decisions. Their combination therefore explains why objectivity remains a central journalistic ideal even though its complete attainment is continually challenged by institutional, political and commercial realities.



Implications of Commercialisation for Journalistic Objectivity in Nigeria

The implications of commercialisation for journalistic objectivity in Nigeria extend beyond the newsroom to democratic governance, public communication and social development. Although commercialisation is essential to the financial survival of contemporary media organisations, its influence on editorial decisions has altered the relationship between journalism and society. Journalism is expected to serve the public through truthful, balanced and independent reporting, yet economic realities increasingly compel media organisations to pursue commercial interests that may conflict with these obligations. Consequently, journalism risks shifting from a public-service institution towards a market-driven enterprise in which news is valued increasingly for its commercial potential. This reinforces Political Economy Theory's argument that ownership structures, economic interests and market forces shape media content and editorial priorities.

One profound implication of commercialisation is the erosion of journalistic credibility. Credibility depends on audiences believing that media reports are accurate, impartial and free from undue influence. When advertisers, political sponsors, corporations or wealthy individuals appear able to purchase favourable coverage, confidence in journalism declines. Sponsored reports, disguised advertorials, paid interviews and commercially motivated programming blur the boundary between journalism and publicity. Audiences may consequently become sceptical even of legitimate investigative reports, weakening the media's moral authority and watchdog function. Udogwu and Ebuka (2024) argue that commercialisation undermines media credibility and public confidence, while Oloyede et al. (2024) similarly observe that commercial pressures continue to weaken audience trust in contemporary journalism.

This credibility problem is reinforced by the increasing prioritisation of sensational, emotional and commercially attractive content. Competition for audiences, advertising revenue and online engagement encourages clickbait headlines, sensational reporting and superficial coverage designed to maximise readership and viewership. Complex developmental issues requiring sustained investigation may consequently receive less attention than stories capable of generating immediate commercial returns. Public-interest journalism is displaced by entertainment-oriented programming and emotionally appealing narratives that attract advertisers and digital traffic. This represents a departure from journalism's traditional responsibility to educate citizens and facilitate meaningful public debate.

The consequences are particularly significant in Nigeria, where journalism has historically served as an important institution through which citizens monitor government and demand accountability. Radio, television and newspapers once enjoyed considerable public confidence, reflected in the popular expression, *"It must be true because I heard it on the radio."* Commercialisation has weakened this confidence as audiences increasingly question the motives behind news reports. When financial considerations influence editorial priorities, the credibility built over decades becomes progressively eroded, leaving citizens uncertain about whether reports genuinely reflect reality or serve commercial and political interests.

Commercialisation also affects democratic governance by altering the quality, diversity and accessibility of information available to citizens. Democracy requires access to accurate, balanced and comprehensive information for informed political decisions. The media facilitate public debate, scrutinise government and provide platforms for diverse voices. However, commercialisation creates unequal access to media visibility. Wealthy politicians, corporations and influential groups can purchase airtime, sponsor programmes and influence editorial priorities, reinforcing the previously discussed "pay-to-play" phenomenon. Financial power can therefore determine whose opinions receive prominence within the public sphere.



The implications for democratic participation are particularly troubling because access to public communication can become a privilege of those with greater economic resources. Political actors who purchase extensive airtime, sponsor interviews or finance media campaigns may enjoy greater visibility than candidates or civic organisations with limited resources. The electorate may consequently receive disproportionate exposure to financially powerful interests while alternative perspectives remain marginalised. Such unequal access undermines fairness, pluralism and equal democratic participation, transforming the media from a platform for broad public participation into a possible instrument for amplifying elite interests.

Recent developments in Nigeria illustrate these concerns. Commercial sponsorship increasingly shapes political communication through sponsored interviews, paid political programmes and preferential airtime. A contemporary example is the widely publicised monthly media chat involving the Minister of the Federal Capital Territory, Chief Nyesom Wike, broadcast simultaneously on several prominent television stations. The commercial arrangements surrounding these broadcasts and subsequent public discussions concerning financial relationships between broadcasters and public institutions generated debate about editorial independence and political communication. Such developments demonstrate how economic relationships between media organisations and political actors can affect perceptions, and potentially the reality, of editorial neutrality.

Equally revealing is the reported cancellation of a fully paid political programme involving the Labour Party governorship candidate in Akwa Ibom State, Akparawa Michael Bush, by Comfort 95.1 FM shortly before broadcast. According to Akpan (2025), the incident generated public debate concerning ownership influence, political patronage and access to privately owned broadcast platforms. It demonstrates that commercialisation extends beyond revenue generation to questions of editorial independence, ownership influence and equitable access to the public sphere. As Akpan (2025) argues, when critical voices are excluded while favourable narratives receive unrestricted access, objectivity risks becoming more symbolic than practical.

Another significant implication is the marginalisation of public-interest journalism. Journalism provides information necessary for social, economic and political development through investigative, developmental, health, environmental and community reporting. However, such journalism is often expensive, time-consuming and less commercially attractive than entertainment, celebrity news and sensational political controversies. Highly commercialised media organisations may therefore allocate greater resources to content capable of generating immediate returns while reducing investment in investigative and developmental reporting. Issues concerning poverty, education, healthcare, environmental sustainability and rural development may consequently receive diminished attention despite their importance to national development.

Closely related to this is the distortion of information. Commercialisation affects not only how much information is available but also its quality, framing and prioritisation. Information with limited commercial value may receive little coverage despite its social importance, whereas sponsored, promotional and sensational content may receive disproportionate prominence. The public agenda can consequently reflect commercial priorities rather than objective assessments of societal needs. Important policy debates, investigative findings and developmental concerns may remain underreported while commercially sponsored narratives dominate headlines and schedules. Commercialisation therefore weakens journalism's agenda-setting responsibility by allowing commercial calculation to influence editorial judgement.

The widespread practice of paid news further illustrates this distortion. Corporate organisations may sponsor favourable newspaper reports or broadcast features while negative information capable of damaging sponsors receives limited attention. Editorial space consequently risks becoming a commodity



available to the highest bidder. The expression “*he who pays the piper calls the tune*” is therefore relevant because sponsorship may determine not only how stories are framed but whether they are reported. Ngantem and Dapiya (2017) similarly contend that commercial interests significantly undermine fairness and objectivity in journalism.

The ethical implications are equally profound. Professional journalism rests on accuracy, fairness, balance, independence, truthfulness and accountability. Commercialisation weakens these principles by introducing financial considerations into editorial decision-making. Accuracy may suffer when sponsored reports exaggerate achievements or omit unfavourable information; fairness is compromised when sponsors receive preferential treatment; and balance becomes difficult where financial obligations discourage opposing viewpoints. Editorial independence is particularly threatened when journalists become financially dependent upon the individuals and organisations they are expected to scrutinise. Commercialisation therefore creates a direct tension between professional ethics and financial interests.

Within Nigeria, *brown envelope journalism* represents a clear manifestation of this ethical deterioration. The practice involves journalists accepting money, gifts or material inducements from newsmakers in exchange for favourable publicity or suppression of unfavourable reports. Although poor remuneration, irregular salaries and weak welfare conditions may encourage the practice, it nevertheless compromises professional integrity by subordinating editorial judgement to financial considerations. Where brown envelope journalism becomes normalised, the distinction between independent journalism and paid publicity weakens, reducing public confidence and the press’s capacity to hold powerful actors accountable. Sanusi et al. (2025) report that commercialisation significantly undermines media independence and public trust, while Inobemhe et al. (2024) identify commercial pressures as a persistent ethical challenge in Nigerian journalism.

The Nigerian media environment also demonstrates how commercialisation intersects with ownership influence. Media ownership remains concentrated substantially among governments, politicians and economically powerful individuals whose political and commercial interests may influence editorial priorities. Ajilore et al. (2012) observed that ownership structures threaten journalistic objectivity because proprietors may influence editorial decisions to protect personal, political or economic interests. Akpan (2026) similarly argues that Nigerian broadcasting is increasingly caught between government control and aggressive commercialisation, making it difficult to balance public-service obligations with economic survival. Under such conditions, editorial autonomy becomes difficult to sustain when profitability and political patronage influence what is published or excluded.

Commercialisation has also transformed the digital media environment. Digital technology has democratised information production, allowing citizens to create, distribute and consume content easily. However, digital platforms also intensify commercial competition through advertising systems that reward engagement rather than accuracy. Online publishers increasingly depend on traffic, advertising impressions, influencer partnerships and social commerce, encouraging sensational and highly shareable content. Ward and Wasserman (2010) argue that new media platforms have fundamentally altered ethical discourse by blurring the distinction between editorial independence and commercial promotion. Thus, digital expansion creates greater access to information while introducing new pressures on objectivity.

The rise of citizen journalism and influencer culture further complicates the distinction between journalism, advertising and personal opinion. Smartphone users can now disseminate information to mass audiences without traditional professional gate-keeping. Although this democratises expression, it also facilitates misinformation, disinformation and commercially motivated material presented as independent reporting. Digital platforms frequently reward engagement above verification, creating favourable conditions for sensationalism, conspiracy theories and manipulated information. The commercial logic of



the digital environment therefore complicates professional journalism's effort to maintain credibility and objectivity.

These developments contribute to audience polarisation and declining trust. Audiences increasingly consume information that confirms existing ideological beliefs, while commercially motivated media organisations may tailor content to these preferences because such material generates engagement and advertising revenue. Instead of challenging misinformation or presenting balanced perspectives, outlets may reinforce audience biases to maintain patronage. The result is a fragmented information environment in which objective journalism competes with commercially rewarding narratives designed primarily to retain audiences rather than promote informed citizenship.

The cumulative effect is the gradual ethical weakening of journalism. Commercialisation can normalise practices previously regarded as violations of professional ethics, including sponsored news presented as editorial content, undisclosed advertorials, preferential political coverage, sensationalism and financial inducements. Over time, such practices may become institutionalised, making ethical violations appear ordinary rather than exceptional. This threatens not only individual journalists' credibility but also journalism's legitimacy as an institution responsible for democratic accountability and public service.

Despite these challenges, commercialisation does not necessarily make objectivity impossible. It demonstrates instead the need for institutional mechanisms capable of balancing economic sustainability with professional responsibility. Media organisations should enforce ethical standards and sanction brown envelope journalism, undisclosed sponsored reporting and conflicts of interest. Improved salaries, welfare packages and professional support would reduce journalists' economic vulnerability. Editorial departments should also be protected from commercial and political interference, while sponsored material should be clearly labelled. Regulatory bodies, including the National Broadcasting Commission, Nigerian Press Council and Advertising Regulatory Council of Nigeria, should consistently enforce professional standards without undermining press freedom.

Sustainable investment in investigative, developmental and community journalism is equally important. Media organisations should devote resources to reporting governance, education, health, security and sustainable development rather than concentrating excessively on commercially attractive content. Alternative funding models, including public-interest foundations, non-profit journalism and carefully regulated public-service broadcasting, could reduce excessive dependence on commercial revenue. Akpan (2026) similarly maintains that preserving broadcasting as a genuine public-service institution requires deliberate efforts to prevent excessive commercial influence over editorial priorities. Media literacy is also essential because informed audiences can distinguish independent journalism from sponsored content, misinformation and commercially motivated narratives and demand greater accountability.

The implications of commercialisation ultimately reinforce the relevance of Social Responsibility Theory and Political Economy Theory. Political Economy Theory explains how ownership concentration, political patronage, advertising dependence and market pressures can weaken editorial independence, distort public discourse and affect democratic accountability. Social Responsibility Theory provides the ethical benchmark by emphasising credibility, accountability, fairness, public trust and responsible journalism. The decline in credibility, ethical compromise, sensationalism, unequal access and weakened democratic participation therefore represent departures from journalism's social obligations while simultaneously reflecting the economic structures identified by Political Economy Theory. Together, the theories provide a useful framework for understanding how commercial pressures can challenge journalistic objectivity within Nigeria's changing media environment.



Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper examined mass media content commercialization and the paradox of objectivity within the Nigerian media environment by exploring the concept of media commercialisation, interrogating the nature of objectivity in journalism, and analysing the implications of commercialization for journalistic practice. The study established that although commercialization has become indispensable for the financial sustainability of media organisations, it has simultaneously intensified pressures that undermine editorial independence, ethical standards, public trust and democratic accountability. The interaction between commercial imperatives and professional obligations creates a persistent paradox in which journalists struggle to balance economic survival with objective reporting. The paper therefore concludes that sustaining credible journalism requires deliberate efforts to reconcile commercial viability with the ethical responsibilities of the press.

Based on the findings of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

1. Media organisations should establish and strictly enforce transparent editorial policies that clearly separate commercial interests from editorial decision-making. Sponsored content, advertorials and paid programmes should be explicitly identified to safeguard journalistic integrity and reduce the influence of commercial pressures on news production, thereby preserving objectivity and public confidence.
2. Media proprietors, professional bodies and regulatory agencies should strengthen ethical compliance through improved welfare for journalists, continuous professional training and effective enforcement of media ethics. Better remuneration and stronger institutional oversight will reduce journalists' vulnerability to financial inducements, brown envelope journalism and other unethical practices associated with commercialisation.
3. Government, media institutions and civil society organisations should promote public-interest journalism and strengthen media literacy programmes across Nigeria.

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