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Influence of Journalism and Media on Promoting Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Sustainable development is the bringing together of global imperatives such as environmental degradation, social inequality, and economic instability. It is in this context that the present study assessed the extent of journalism and media influence in the promotion of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Nigeria based on a review of existing literature. The tracing of the evolution of journalism in Nigeria is followed by the role of journalism in public awareness of the SDGs, as well as the challenges that check and limit effective sustainability reports. The study found that traditional media remain central in shaping public perception, especially on issues of health and poverty, whereas new digital platforms enhance information access and civic engagement. Yet, the media face challenges still further: funding constraints, political interference, limited journalist capacity, and the digital divide, which militate against their optimal functioning. Journalists demonstrated different perceptions and experienced ethical dilemmas that often influenced the manner of framing sustainability issues. The review concluded that Nigerian media exist in an important yet complex position for promoting sustainable development requiring improved training, better independence of the media, and a strategically articulated use of digital tools. The findings underscore an urgent need for a multi-stakeholder initiative to strengthen the media contribution to the sustainable development agenda for Nigeria.

Keywords: Awareness, Journalism, Media, Sustainable Development, Nigeria

Introduction

Sustainable development has emerged as the primary global concept with respect to the ever worsening interlinked problems of environmental degradation, social inequalities and economic instability, with the United Nations claiming that sustainable development is development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Owing to all this, it can be argued that sustainable development has become a necessity for countries that are poised towards inclusive growth and ecological balance (United Nations Nigeria, 2023). Adoption of SDGs in 2015 has very well consolidated this agenda into 17 goal areas that stretch from poverty eradication through quality education, gender equality, climate action, and sustainable cities.

Unique in Nigeria, the issues confronting sustainable development are not only challenges but also opportunities for this most populated African nation and the largest economy in the continent. The depth of poverty, socio-economic disparities, poor infrastructure, environmental degradation, and ineffective governance have rendered the realization of the SDGs beyond 2030 more difficult (Atewola-odule et al., 2025). In this context, of course, media and journalism are taking positions increasingly among the most important actors in sustainable development through dissemination of information awareness advocacy and public education and especially accountability.

The purpose of journalism and mass media all over the world is to shape public opinion and influence policymakers, as well as holding stakeholders accountable (McQuail, 2010). Nigeria's media ecosystem includes prints newspapers, television and radio stations, rapidly expanding digital platforms, and social media. All these actors play a crucial role in engaging citizens, amplifying the sustainable development narrative, and behavioural changes at both the individual and institutional levels (Odulami, 2024). However, the media's effectiveness does dwindle due to its failure in proper reporting, critical investigation, and creative dissemination of complicated sustainable development themes within the socio-political realities of Nigeria.

Recently, studies (Das & Dash, 2025; Vaishali & Lalit, 2025; Judijanto & Al-Amin, 2025; Mohammed et al., 2025; Farina et al., 2025), have pointed out how media constructs environmental awareness levels and public discourses regarding development goals. Systemic problems such as low media literacy among the people, political interference, lack of funds for investigative journalism, and the proliferation of misinformation, especially on digital platforms, are usually hindering this much-needed influence (Talabi et al., 2019). For instance, how journalists perceive such issues, ethical considerations, and the ability to frame sustainability topics shape how these issues are delivered to the general public (Odoh & Olagunju, 2025).

This study critically reviews both empirical and conceptual studies emanating from the existing literature that looks into the very many ways through which journalism and media have effects on promoting sustainable development in Nigeria. It considers how such media constructs as awareness creation

through media narratives, challenges faced by the media with respect to sustainable development reporting, the new role of digital platforms, and the perception of journalists as frontline communicators. Understanding these dynamics leads to the improvement of media strategies that effectively sustain and promote Nigeria's sustainable development agenda.

Historical Context of Journalism and Media in Nigeria

History of journalism and media in Nigeria has roots deep into the colonial period. The first newspapers were mainly designed to accommodate imperial administrative interests, but they later became important forums for expression and discussion of growing nationalism. Out of these much-enhanced systems have grown the Nigerian media that has left behind a broad landscape of traditional media sources, that includes print newspapers, radio and television, as well as the more recently exploded digital and social media spaces. It has now become a very relevant area of political engagement, social commentary, and cultural expression in Nigeria (Ojo, 2018).

Historically, the media was a crucial watchdog and channel for discussions on national development, although such issues usually took political coloration concerning topics like governance, education, health, and welfare (Ojo, 2018). Sustainability issues started to gain more media coverage after the United Nations in 2015 adopted and domesticated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by Nigeria's government (NGF, 2020).

The expanding role of the mass media went beyond politics when they took the active campaign to create public awareness and discourse about sustainable development challenges, including poverty eradicating, public health, education, and environmental sustainability. The Nigerian media began taking on SDG reporting, with the thinking that alerting its citizenry to such objectives would activate participatory governance and bottom-up social transformation (Atewola-odule et al., 2025).

However, the propitious fortunes of Nigerian journalism have not been devoid of several hindrances of government censorship during military rule, for instance, economic challenges to the sustainability of the media, ownership biases, and an increasingly complicated ethical consideration. The end result is a vibrant and influential environment for the media but fragmented, with differences in quality and access for urban and rural populations (Afrobarometer, 2022; Talabi et al., 2019). This is a hybrid media landscape that fuses the new and old. Most parts of the world are still consumed by old media, but old actually creates a transformation in the sharing and consumption of information, some of which has to do with sustainable development. This opens a window for participation, and yet they face the hurdles of misinformation and credibility (Odoh & Olagunju, 2025).

Role of Journalism and Media in Promoting Sustainable Development in Nigeria

The media assume many tasks that are necessary for sustainable development in Nigeria, far beyond mere reportage. They extend into the realms of advocacy, public engagement, and influence over policies. Newspaper, radio, television, and digital media are but different forms

of media through which the public can be mobilized to understand the comprehensive targets of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The goals are poverty eradication, health and well-being, education, climate action, among others and gender equality (United Nations Nigeria, 2023).

New research works (Atewola-odule et al., 2025; United Nations Nigeria, 2025; Nigerian Youth SDGs, 2025; Dataphyte, 2025; Das & Dash, 2025), indicate that health is the SDG issue mostly reported by Nigerian media, followed by matters on poverty alleviation under SDG 1 and education under SDG 4. The priorities of the nation are therefore mirrored in the media agenda. The content analyses of Punch, Daily Trust, and Vanguard and other leading Nigerian newspapers show among other SDG components that health issues dominate particular coverage under sustainable development, probably given the current impact factor as well as audience interest.

Through agenda-setting mechanisms, media coverage influences public consciousness and frames sustainability issues in manner that promote social and political debate (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The media in Nigeria frames issues like health (especially maternal mortality and infectious diseases) as crises in order to generate public opinion and pressure the policymakers to act (Atewola-odule et al., 2025). However, fragmentation in the coverage of education and environmental issues shows some gaps that may constrain the overall understanding and support toward the wider sustainable development goals.

The media also serves some advocacy purpose: mobilizing public opinion and thus promoting participatory democracy. Investigative journalists are now beginning to shed light on abuses of corruption and governance deficiencies that undermine sustainable development initiatives. Water sanitation, climate change, and gender-based violence campaigns have gained traction, which showcases the evolving role of the media as a national development stakeholder alongside NGOs (Odulami, 2024).

Broadcast media, especially the radio, hold high prestige in Nigeria as an important medium of communication among so many languages and a wide dispersion of people who are less reachable to segments of the country accessible by print or the Internet. These radio talk shows and community outreach programs sometimes address sustainable development issues and in doing so, build an awareness and dialogue at the grassroots level (Igbashangev, 2025). On the other hand, social media and the rise of digital platforms foster citizen engagement and real-time information sharing while opening new avenues for inclusive participation in the sustainability conversation (Odoh & Olagunju, 2025).

However, these have not been without their challenges. Political and economic pressure often distort press reportage, while sensationalism distorts the understanding of complex sustainability issues among the general populace. In addition, low levels of media literacy among some sections of the audience further whip out room for effective communication. Solving these problems would require concerted efforts to build media capacity, uphold ethical standards, and design engaging content that emphasizes solutions over problems (Talabi et al., 2019).

Challenges and Limitations

Nigerian media, once recognized as a strategic actor in performance of sustainable development, are now saddled with critical challenges and limitations that deny them from realizing their full potential. These challenges affect sustainability journalism scope, quality, and impact, as well as media advocacy.

i. **Funding and Resource Constraints:** The most pressing constraint, perhaps, is the question of funding that goes hand in hand with resource scarcity in the media houses themselves. Less financial resources tend to limit extensive investigative journalism and the kind of deeper coverage required of complex sustainability issues such as climate change, biodiversity conservation, or systemic poverty (Atewola-odule et al., 2025). Most Nigerian media are constrained by budget options that depend mostly on advertising revenues, which most of the time do not allow for costly or controversial reporting on environmental issues. Such financial fragility limits the journalists' access to training and the acquisition of technical tools necessary for effective sustainability reporting.

ii. **Political and Corporate Interferences:** Progressive media freedoms in Nigeria are now faced with political pressures and censorship. There could be instances whereby the media houses may receive pressures from government authorities or corporate interests that would compel the media into minimizing or altering reports on sustainability topics that could expose incidences of corruption or environmental harm (Talabi et al., 2019). Journalist independence is compromised by this interference because they do not perform their work genuinely, thereby affecting integrity and objectivity in sustainability coverage.

iii. **Lower Media Literacy and Public Engagement:** The efficiency of media in promoting sustainable development draws validity from the perception of such audiences on the coverage and their engagement in it. In the case of Nigeria, levels of media literacy are low, while access to credible material is uneven. This narrows the public's view of sustainability in reality and, thus, how they interpret news about it (Afrobarometer, 2022). Cumulatively, this brings forth misinformation or apathy as undermining the media's role in mobilizing informed citizen participation.

iv. **Sensationalism and Imbalanced Reporting:** Some media resort to sensationalism to draw audience attention, probably distorting the very nuanced realities of sustainable development challenges. Such reporting focuses on problems: reporting poverty or health crises, but little dimensions of solutions, innovation, or success stories (Atewola-odule et al., 2025). This imbalance most probably leads to public desensitization or defeatism instead of motivating it collectively toward action.

v. **Digital Divide and Misinformation:** The advent of social media and digital platforms has made it possible to engage on a very wide scale, but also to create challenges such as the digital divide and misinformation (Odoh & Olagunju, 2025). Poor rural

communities and low-income people may have limited internet connectivity and exclude them from the larger sustainability dialogues hosted in cyber space. In addition, most of the disinformation and fake news that thrive online obscure the understanding of the public on sustainability issues.

vi. **Capacity and Training Gaps** Reporters lacking the requisite training for sustainability coverage are limited in their ability to simplify the technical information-in daily terms or context. Most reporters have little or no exposure to environmental science or development theory or policy (Talabi et al., 2019). Having limited access to the internet makes rural populations and low-income groups excluded from the online sustainable dialogue. Added, misinformation along with fake news spreads on the internet and confuse their understanding of the sustainability issue towards public awareness.

vii. **Training and Capacity Blindness:** The limited journalists' training on sustainability topics restricts their access to that purpose of simplifying technical information and relating it to the everyday life realities. Most reporters know nothing about environmental science, development theory, or policy analysis, which is essential for informing and reporting accurately (Talabi et al., 2019).

Impact of Media on Public Awareness and Policy Support

The mass media in Nigeria creates public awareness concerning sustainable development, but the media's part in ensuring that this translates into tangible public policy support remains unclear and contested.

i. Public Awareness and Attitudinal Change: Empirical evidence (Atewola-odule et al., 2025; Nigerian Voluntary National Review, 2025; Nigerian Youth SDG Scorecard, 2025; UN Sustainable Development Report, 2025, shows that mass media in Nigeria really puts to the fore sustainable development issues to the public**.** For instance, Atewola-odule et al. 2025), use mixed methods for their study by combining content analysis of some major Nigerian newspapers with a survey of the residents of Osun State. In the inquiry, they note that the content of media coverage, particularly that dealing with SDG 3 (Health), is associated very strongly with public awareness. Some 74% of survey respondents stated that media exposure increased their knowledge of environmental and development issues.

Media messaging is also positive towards shaping attitudes; in fact, it sometimes initiates behavior change, for example, in promoting health and environmental best practices. These findings therefore strengthen the agenda-setting theory, which proposes that the media determines what the public considers important by focusing the public's attention on highly salient issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

ii. Media's Role in Advocacy and Behavioural Influence: This form of mass media also provides platforms for advocacy by bringing to public attention weaknesses in governance affecting sustainable development, including corruption in health service delivery, poor, inadequate educational infrastructures, and environmental degradation (Odulami, 2024). Such journalism and media campaigns also contribute to shaping perceptions among citizens

regarding accountability, but they're moved towards triggering civic engagement pressure on policy-makers. Radio talk shows and outreach programs, particularly in vernacular languages, in a way complement the broadening of the participatory base, which creates possibilities for community-level dialogue (Igbashangev, 2025). Social media would also allow room for youth activism as well as peer-to-peer sharing of information, extending the reach and immediacy of sustainability narratives (Odoh & Olagunju, 2025).

iii. Constraints to Policy Support: Although an awareness of sustainable development issues is much dependent on publicity, its translation to explicit support for associated policies is rather weak, as observed by (Atewola-Odule et al. 2025). Media exposure alone may not be enough to generate collective political will or policy change, as suggested by the modest correlation of policy support to media exposure from their survey. Again, it should be underscored that perennial distrust in governance and socio-economic constraints limiting civic participation, as well as the loss of touch between media narratives and ground realities, can all account for this gap.

Chima et al. (2020) noted that advocacy by the media should involve complementary strategies that are direct contacts to communities, educating them, and engaging policymakers in discussions in order to bridge awareness with action. Thus, the SDGs work mostly within different frames-an attention-grabbing subject has been health-while goals such as education, climate action, and gender equality have received less attention, thus limiting extent to which discussion on policies could be done (Atewola-odule et al., 2025).

iv. Theoretical Implications: These findings also point toward a complex role of the media in sustainable development in Nigeria. The media are indeed agenda-setters who shape public discourse and influence attitudinal change but fall short as catalysts for policy support. Accordingly, one must undertake multifaceted communication media advocacy in combination with grassroots mobilization and reforms in governance to enhance sustainability in the developmental outcome (Sachs, 2015).

Roles of New Media in Digital Platforms

New media and digital platforms have reshaped the face of journalism and media in Nigeria, creating new platforms through which sustainable development can be advocated. Unlike in mainstream media, new media has participatory, interactive, and instantaneous capacities of communications, which have widened the reach and impact of sustainability discourse in Nigeria.

i. Expanding Reach and Inclusion: Social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are digital platforms that promote free and faster access, sharing, and creation of materials for sustainable development among citizens, particularly today's youth (Odoh & Olagunju, 2025). This democratization of information has largely minimalized traditional barriers inspired by geography, language, and socio-economic status; thus, it fosters wider participation among Nigeria's populace. Digital activism campaigns initiated by the youth within Nigeria have recently sprung into life. Among them are climate change activism,

gender equality, and anti-corruption, thus creating a national consciousness and compelling policymakers with advocacy issues.

ii. Information and Crisis Reporting in Real-time: In situations of floods or droughts, health crises, and the like, the new media have proved themselves crucial in real-time tracking, monitoring, and reporting on sustainability issues. The Climate Change in News Media initiative of UNESCO has made the digital reporting training possible for journalists in Nigeria. Among others, the Premium Times has produced timely and comprehensive reports on the impact of floods in Kebbi State and climate adaptation among farmers from this initiative (UNESCO, 2024). These stories have reached national and international audiences, providing relevant insight and aiding in mobilization efforts for response.

iii. Creative Storytelling and Solutions Journalism: Innovative storytelling techniques such as podcasts and video documentaries extending to data journalism are possible through the use of new media. Independent media houses backed by the Nigeria Media Innovation Program (NAMIP) have been able to address some of the financial and operational challenges they face using digital strategies. Policy Dialogue Series on Twitter Spaces, for example, is an initiative of BusinessDay that engages policymakers and civil society on sustainable development policy debates, while such a digital-first approach to storytelling enhances audience interaction and commitment (NAMIP, 2025).

On the other hand, pragmatic responses to everyday challenges regarding sustainability increasingly find a foothold on digital platforms. In this regard, constructive journalism is meant to reinforce positive social action and restore public faith in the continuation efforts (NAMIP, 2025).

iv. Challenges and Risks: That notwithstanding, there are several inhibitions facing new media in Nigeria. One could say that the digital divide still exists since many rural, low-income Nigerians do not have dependable internet access, thus hindering direct access to digital sustainability discourse (Afrobarometer, 2022). Moreover, misinformation and fake news spread rapidly through social media, sometimes undermining confidence in credible sources and creating public misconceptions by limiting knowledge of sustainability-related science and policy (Odoh & Olagunju, 2025).

Regulatory uncertainties, together with the overriding concern about possible censorship, are bad omens in the ability of digital media to acquire that freedom and independence with which such operations must stand tall (Talabi et al., 2019). Open communication was, however, not without some challenge. Balancing openness and misinformation control is a delicate challenge for Nigerian digital platforms.

Journalists' Perceptions and Ethical Considerations

The perception of Nigerian journalists concerning their role in promoting sustainable development influences how sustainability is framed and communicated within the media. Complex findings among a recent study of Nigerian journalists by (Gana et al., 2025), show a

combination of awareness and professional motivation along with ethical dilemmas and structural problems affecting their contributions to sustainable development reporting.

i. **Awareness and knowledge about Sustainable Development:** According to (Kolawole and Ojebuyi, 2019), research has shown that many Nigerian journalists only have an elementary understanding of the conceptual frameworks bases of sustainable development and development journalism. Though some are willing to report on issues relevant to the society's quest for sustainability, the gap that remains is that relating to the application of sustainability principles in daily journalism practice (Atewola-odule et al., 2025). This lack of awareness often results in reporting that is only shallow, which focuses on episodic events without systemic analysis.

ii. **Influence of Ownership and Editorial Policies:** One can usually hear among journalists that they have been forcefully swayed either by profit motive of owners or editor's directive regarding specific development stories. Most of the sustainability stories are meanwhile lost in the race to achieve commercial viability, along with the more juicy or politically capitalized contents (Ishaku & Asicus, 2022). Ideally, the nature of gatekeeping of the editors may leave out development and welfare stories from coverage, especially when they do not fit owners' interests; hence different major-nation-al newspapers emphasize different aspects of SDG (Kolawole & Ojebuyi, 2019).

iii. **Ethical Problems and Professionalism:** Such ethical issues covered a journalist's perception of sustainable development reporting. Although some journalists conform to professionalism and social responsibility in accentuating accuracy, fairness, and public interest, some journalists undergo pressures that damage their integrity in the practice of journalism. Threatened censorship, political intimidation, self-censorship, and lack of access to reliable data restrict journalists' ability to provide comprehensive and unbiased sustainability news (Bitikoro, 2024).

Several studies (Alade et al., 2025; Edetaen, 2024; Adediran & Chukwu, 2023; Oyedokun, 2022; Emenyeonu, 2018; John, 2018), indicate that journalists usually exercise restraint even when reporting sensitive issues of sustainability that have linkages to corruption or environmental degradation especially when government or corporate actors are involved. Thus, the development of robust developmental journalism and accountability reporting is undermined by precarious environments within which journalists operate.

iv. **Role Perception and Capacity:** Most of Nigerian journalists view their roles as more of being reporters of events rather than change agents or advocates for development (Guanah et al., 2024). Inadequate specialized training and professional development in sustainable development reporting severely limit these people, allowing them to play their role effectively! Studies have confirmed the positive return in terms of increased confidence and motivation to address harder developmental issues.

v. **Call for Enabling Environment**: As a result of the above, there have been calls from journalists as well as scholars for the establishment of the enabling environment that would favour a free media, conduct capacity building, and promote ethical journalism practice, to strengthen the media's role in promoting sustainable development. This is the solution offered for structural barriers as well as for creating environments conducive to developmental reporting through collaboration of media organizations with government, civil society, and international partners (Atewola-odule et al., 2025; Bitikoro, 2024).

Conclusion

Multidimensional and highly significant for sustainable development in Nigeria, the role of journalism and of communication media is fraught with challenges but also holds great promises. The literature review indicates that the media in Nigeria have been key to raising awareness and carrying out public education on the sustainable development goals (SDGs) while simultaneously advocating for policy changes and encouraging civic participation.The media help shape public opinion and debate on key sustainability issues such as health, poverty, education, and environmental conservation.

However, sustainability reporting suffers tremendous inconsistences, from lack of funding and political interferences to poor capacities of journalists and public media literacy. The traditional media were, and to some extent still remain, the arbiters of national development discourse, while the new media and digital platforms are creating spaces for real-time sustainability reporting and interactive public engagement, albeit in the face of challenges like misinformation and digital divide.

Another major issue is the perceptions and ethics surrounding sustainability reporting by journalists themselves; they greatly determine the quality and impact of sustainability reporting. The motivations, knowledge, and challenges facing journalists in their work impact the framing and reporting of sustainability issues, demonstrating a need for specialized education and enabling media environments.

While the Nigerian media system has many promising factors for furthering sustainable development, concerted efforts to break structural barriers and to strengthen its independence, professional capacity, and innovative approaches to communication is a must to allow it to achieve its full promise. Increased research in the future should explore longitudinal consequences of media interventions and changes that digital media constitutes toward sustainability communication.

Recommendations

The following recommendations, derived from this study, are put forward to enhance the role and impact of media in this very vital area:

- Priority training programs should be offered in sustainable development concepts, investigative journalism, and digital journalism. This will prepare journalists to

generate in-depth, accurate, and contextual material on sustainability that contributes to public awareness and discourse in policy. To partner with universities, international bodies such as UNESCO, and development agencies for upgrading the continuous professional development of teachers.

- To reduce editorial interference, Nigerian media organizations should seek other revenues that are not strictly from advertising and donor funding. Newer ideas like membership programs, crowdfunding for sustainability journalism projects, and partnerships with civil society organizations working on the SDGs could provide more stable and aligned financial support.
- Promotion of Media Freedoms and Editorial Independence. The establishment and protection of media freedom by governments and regulatory authorities will allow for balanced and independent reporting on sustainability issues. Such policies should preferably include provisions protecting journalists against censorship, intimidation, and political interference while dealing with environmental and governance issues, strengthening accountability mechanisms critical for sustainable development.
- To close the digital divide, efforts should be stepped up for the establishment of internet infrastructure and affordable access in rural and unserved areas whereby all have access to sustainability information through new media. In parallel, media literacy campaigns should be conducted so that the public can become empowered to assess sustainability news critically, counter misinformation, and actively engage in sustainability dialogues.
- Cross-sector collaborations among media, government, civil society, academia, and partners coming from international structures should be nurtured to extend the sharing of resources, joint sustainability campaigns, and amplification of coherent messaging. Multi-stakeholder collaboration can uphold such sustainable development communication to increase outreach, credibility, and impact.
- Media and humanitarian agencies must catalyze the evolution of sustainability reporting towards solutions journalism that accompanies challenges facing the vulnerable with grounded responses and entries into practical successes. Clear guidelines regarding ethics must, therefore, be established and enforced in a manner that ensures, inter alia, that accuracy, balance, and public interest are upheld. This may stimulate enough energy for constructive public engagement and the building of trust.
- There must be set standards and norms for sustainability and environmental reporting within the regulatory frameworks of the Nigerian media. They include requirements on ESG disclosure and a guideline that promotes corporate and governmental communications which take on the sustainability forms. Monitoring and assessment with respect to sustainability will be embraced to check compliance and progress.

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