FROM NEWSPRINT TO HASHTAGS: MEDIA TRANSFORMATION AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF OPPOSITION POLITICS IN NIGERIA, 1960–2023

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Opposition Politics, Underground Media, Digital Rights, History, Regulation

Abstract

Research Problem: *Nigeria lacks a settled domestic framework for weighing citizens' right to organise online against the state's stated security interests, and the state's appetite for controlling dissenting media persists alongside citizens' capacity to resist that control.*
Methods/Theory: *A historical-analytical, documentary approach examines fourteen secondary sources on Nigerian press history, communication studies, and legal scholarship across four periods: the colonial press, the military era, the early Fourth Republic, and the digital age. The study integrates media history, state–civil society relations, and digital rights theory.*
Results: *Opposition communication moved from the printing press to the smartphone, yet the state's instinct to control the communication channel remained constant across colonial, military, and civilian administrations. Its capacity to make that control stick has weakened, notably where platform suspensions were found unlawful by a regional court.*
Conclusion: *The balance of technical, economic, and legal power has shifted, gradually and unevenly, towards the citizen as the cost of producing and distributing opposition content has fallen and regional human rights jurisprudence has begun to catch up.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The study offers a historically grounded, integrated account of media as a determinant of how opposition movements gain reach and durability, and a framework for regulating opposition-relevant digital media that neither denies the state's security interest nor licenses reflexive channel-closing.*
Recommendation: *Regulators should adopt a published, judicially reviewable suspension standard with a defined harm threshold and automatic expiry; journalists and platforms should adopt de-escalatory reporting norms; archival and university library institutions should establish digital-preservation partnerships.*

1. Introduction

The history of opposition politics in Nigeria cannot be told without reference to the media through which that opposition found a voice. From the nationalist press of the colonial period to the youth-led protests of 2020, the manner in which dissent reached the public has shaped how far it travelled, how it was received, and how the state chose to respond. This paper does not argue that media caused opposition politics to exist; grievance, economic hardship, and the ambitions of political actors did that. Its argument is that the character and reach of opposition politics in any given period was substantially shaped by the medium available, by who controlled it, and by how difficult it was for the state to interrupt it.

Scholars have approached this relationship one period at a time. The colonial press and its contest with the administration is the subject of Omu (1968), and the press and the underground media under military rule have been examined in detail (Olukotun, 2002b). The return to civilian government in 1999 drew a smaller body of work on media accountability (Olukotun & Omole, 2004). The most recent studies concern the #EndSARS protests of 2020 against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit long accused of extrajudicial killings and extortion, and the 2021 suspension of Twitter (Dambo et al., 2020; Mohammed & Adelakun, 2023), together with the legal questions that suspension raised (Lawal et al., 2025).

This literature is rich but fragmented. Each study is anchored to a single period, medium, or episode, and none follows the same two variables, namely how opposition actors communicate and how the state responds to that communication, from the colonial press to the hashtag. The earlier studies were written before the digital turn and could not ask whether the state's behaviour was changing or only the technology it confronted. The digital-era studies, for their part, tend to treat the Twitter suspension as a novel episode rather than as the latest instance of an older pattern. Few studies have therefore analysed systematically how the transformation from newsprint to hashtags has reconfigured opposition politics across the entire 1960–2023 period, or how the state's response has remained constant while its capacity to control has weakened. This study fills that gap by reading the whole record as one integrated sequence and by connecting it to the regional human rights jurisprudence that is now emerging.

The research problem this study addresses is the absence of a settled domestic framework in Nigeria for weighing citizens' right to organise online against the state's stated security interests, together with the persistent tension between the state's appetite for controlling dissenting media and the citizen's capacity to resist that control. Nigeria's approach to opposition-relevant media has oscillated between two failure modes: state overreach that closes a channel without addressing the grievance behind it, and a vacuum of clear rules that leaves citizens and platforms uncertain of what is permitted.

The study has three objectives: (i) to trace the transformation of media and opposition politics across four periods, namely the colonial press, the military era, the early Fourth Republic, and the digital age; (ii) to analyse the state's response to opposition media across those periods; and (iii) to propose a framework for regulating opposition-relevant digital media that is grounded in the regional human rights instruments Nigeria has already ratified. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and sharpens the research gap; Section 3 sets out the materials and methods; Section 4 develops the theoretical framework; Section 5 presents the results; Section 6

discusses them in relation to theory and the existing literature; and Section 7 concludes with recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media and Opposition Politics in Nigeria: A Historical Overview

Three concepts organise this review. Opposition politics denotes organised dissent directed against the government of the day, whether it is carried by parties, civil society coalitions, or leaderless movements. Opposition-relevant media denotes any channel, from the printing press to a microblogging platform, through which such dissent reaches the public. Channel-closing denotes state action that targets the medium itself, by proscribing a title, jamming a station, or suspending a platform, rather than answering the grievance expressed through it.

The empirical literature falls into four clusters: studies of the colonial press, of media under military rule, of the early Fourth Republic, and of the digital era. Read together, these studies share a common premise: the relationship between the state and opposition media has been a recurring contest in state–civil society relations rather than a settled matter. Their strength lies in the depth with which each period has been documented. Their weakness is that the periodisation which gives them depth also makes it difficult to tell whether what changes from one period to the next is the state's behaviour or merely the technology it confronts. The subsections below review each cluster critically and show how each connects to the research problem.

2.2 The Colonial Press and the Making of an Opposition Tradition

Nigeria's tradition of using the press as a vehicle for organised political dissent predates the nation itself. Omu (1968) shows that the educated Africans who founded the nationalist papers expected the free press of the British political tradition and were, almost unavoidably, critical of colonial administration. Administrators sought to control this press, but political and practical considerations limited outright prosecution to cases in which an editor's activities directly threatened the colonial interest, as they often did. The result was a nationalist press testing the limits of what the administration would tolerate, most visibly in Nnamdi Azikiwe's West African Pilot and its sister publications, which built a mass readership around anti-colonial argument before independence.

Omu's account is foundational. Its central insight, that press freedom was contested and negotiated rather than simply granted or denied, set a template within which later governments, colonial and postcolonial alike, would continue to work. Its limitation for present purposes is one of scope: it concerns the colonial period and the West African region, and so cannot show whether the state's posture changed after independence. By 1960 the pattern was nonetheless set. Opposition politics in Nigeria required a newspaper, and access to a newspaper, or the capital and connections to found one, was itself a form of political power. This is the point from which the present study asks what happened to that posture as the medium changed.

2.3 Military Rule and the Turn to Underground Media

The three decades of military rule that dominated Nigerian political life between 1966 and 1999, interrupted only by the short-lived Second Republic, fundamentally altered the relationship between opposition politics and the media. The press operated, at best, in continuous negotiation with a state that regarded independent reporting as a threat to be managed rather than a right to be respected (Agbaje, 1993). The crisis that followed the

annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election, widely acknowledged to have been won by Chief Moshood Abiola, shows how far coverage was shaped by the constraints under which journalists worked as much as by their editorial judgement (Ibelema, 2003).

It was in this climate that opposition politics turned to underground and guerrilla media. Opposition actors adapted older, less formal channels of protest communication to the conditions of military rule, and these ran alongside the printed guerrilla press (Olukotun, 2002a). Two guerrilla journals and a pirate radio station, later known as Radio Kudirat, opposed the military state directly, and a vigorous civil society was able to check, to some extent, the encroachment of a repressive government even under severe restriction (Olukotun, 2002b). Radio Kudirat broadcast in English, Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo, which gave opposition politics a reach that print alone could not have achieved once so many newspapers had been proscribed or forced underground.

Adebanwi (2011) adds an important qualification. The secret collaboration he documents between radical journalists and sympathetic agents within the security services in the 1990s shows that the state was not a monolithic actor. This complicates any simple story of opposition media triumphing over a uniformly hostile state, and it suggests that even the most repressive period contained more internal variation than the confrontation between the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and the Abacha government is often given credit for. It also suggests that durable channels of opposition communication have historically depended not only on technology but on fractures within the state itself, a resource that a purely technical solution to today's digital-rights problem cannot manufacture on demand.

Critically, these studies are strongest on how opposition communicated and weakest on what the repertoire of state control tells us beyond the period studied. They document proscription, detention, and the harassment of underground outlets, but they do not ask whether these were features of military rule specifically or of a longer pattern. That question can only be answered by following the same variable forward in time.

2.4 Democratic Restoration and the Limits of a Free Press

The return to civilian government in 1999 raised expectations of a freer press. The transition did produce a more open environment, but older patterns of state sensitivity toward critical coverage persisted in modified form (Olukotun & Omole, 2004). Civilian governments continued to draw on regulatory tools and habits of mind inherited from the military period whenever coverage touched on matters they considered sensitive to national security or state interest. On the present authors' reading, this is unsurprising given the continuity of many political actors across the two eras: what changed was the era, not necessarily the actors' modus operandi.

The legal infrastructure available to regulators in this period, including the Nigerian Communications Act of 2003, was drafted primarily to govern telecommunications infrastructure and licensing rather than to answer questions of speech and platform access (Lawal et al., 2025). Two limitations follow. Studies of this period end before social media emerged, so they cannot show what the state did when digital platforms began to play the organising role that guerrilla print and underground radio had played a decade earlier. And, as studies of media accountability, they do not examine whether the shift from print to broadcast to digital media was accompanied by a shift in the state's basic posture toward critical media. That is the question this study takes up.

2.5 The Digital Turn: From #EndSARS to the Twitter Ban

The digital-era literature begins with the October 2020 protests that became known globally by the hashtag EndSARS. Dambo et al. (2020) place the movement within a wider discussion of how online protest is understood elsewhere on the continent. Its leadership was decentralised by design, with influence spread among numerous voices rather than concentrated in the few identifiable figures who led NADECO (Abimbade et al., 2022), and social media disseminated information, coordinated protest activity, and built a shared sense of collective identity among participants who often had no prior connection to one another (Akerele-Popoola et al., 2022).

A second group of studies addresses the state's response. The government's reaction to EndSARS, and to Twitter's continuing influence in Nigerian political life, culminated in June 2021 in the indefinite suspension of Twitter's operations in Nigeria. The first empirical evidence suggests a suspension that was widely regarded as unlawful and widely evaded: a clear majority of sampled posts characterised it as unlawful, a large majority of surveyed users kept access through virtual private networks (VPNs), and the economic cost ran into hundreds of millions of dollars within weeks (Mohammed & Adelakun, 2023). Elega et al. (2023) read the ban as part of a broader pattern of the state extending its regulatory reach into platforms it does not own or operate, with data politics, algorithmic governance, and surveillance at stake.

Muhammad Auwal and Ersoy (2024) add a media-specific dimension. Applying a peace journalism framework to coverage of the ban, they find that domestic reporting oscillated between narratives that escalated the confrontation between the state and its citizens and narratives that sought to de-escalate it. This is a useful corrective to any account that treats the digital era as one in which conventional media has become irrelevant to opposition politics. Lawal et al. (2025) turn to law. They examine two judgments of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Community Court of Justice, Amnesty International Togo and Others v. The Togolese Republic and SERAP v. Federal Republic of Nigeria (SERAP being the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project), both of which found that a government's suspension of internet or platform access violated citizens' rights under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

These studies are rigorous within their frames, but they share two limits. Those on EndSARS treat the movement as new in its organisation without asking what it replaced, and those on the Twitter ban treat the suspension as an episode rather than as a point in a longer series. The legal scholarship identifies the gap in Nigeria's regulatory architecture but does not trace how long that gap has existed. Each therefore leaves open the historical question that gives the digital episode its meaning.

2.6 Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on Nigerian media history and opposition politics, there is limited research that systematically examines how the transformation from newsprint to hashtags has reconfigured opposition politics, and how the state's response has remained constant while its capacity to control has weakened. Existing studies focus on specific periods or media forms without providing an integrated analysis. As Sections 2.2 to 2.5 show, the colonial and military periods are well documented but the studies stop before the digital turn; the work on the 2021 suspension illuminates that episode but does not situate it in the longer sequence; and the

legal scholarship identifies the regulatory vacuum without tracing its history. This study fills that gap by treating the four periods as a single sequence, holding constant the question of how the state responds to the channel through which dissent travels, and using the result to propose a regulatory framework. The review thereby leads directly to the research problem stated in Section 1.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical design based on documentary analysis of secondary sources. This design was chosen because the research problem is longitudinal: it concerns continuity and change in the state's response across more than six decades, and the evidence for each period already exists in the scholarly record in the form of archival press history, content analysis, survey data, and legal analysis. A historical-analytical design allows findings generated by different methods to be compared across periods in a way that a single-method empirical study of one episode cannot. The colonial press is treated as the foundational antecedent of the 1960–2023 period rather than as a separate object of study, because the pattern the study traces begins there.

3.2 Selection Criteria

Sources were selected against the following criteria:

- Publication date: materials published between 1960 and 2025. The final corpus ranges from 1968 to 2025.
- Geographic focus: Nigeria. Studies of British West Africa were retained only where Nigeria features substantially in the analysis (Omu, 1968).
- Thematic relevance: materials explicitly addressing media transformation, opposition politics, the state's response to dissenting media, or digital rights and platform regulation.
- Scholarly standing and grounding: peer-reviewed journal articles with an empirical, historical, or legal basis. Sources were excluded if they did not engage the Nigerian context or were purely theoretical without empirical grounding.

3.3 Source Identification

Sources were identified through searches of academic journal databases and publisher platforms, supplemented by citation chaining from the reference lists of the key studies. Search terms combined variants of Nigeria with press freedom, underground media, guerrilla journalism, opposition politics, EndSARS, Twitter ban, and internet access as a human right. Candidate sources were screened for relevance against the criteria in Section 3.2, and the final corpus of fourteen sources was retained for in-depth analysis. Legal scholarship was included to capture the regional human rights jurisprudence relevant to platform suspension.

3.4 Analytical Procedure

Analysis proceeded in five steps. First, each source was read in full and summarised against a common extraction frame: period covered, medium, actors, evidence type, the state's response, and the outcome reported. Second, extracts were coded thematically against three categories derived directly from the research objectives: (a) media form and the organisation of opposition (Objective i); (b) the state's response to the channel (Objective ii); and (c) the balance of technical, economic, and legal power between state and citizen, which informs Objective iii. Third, coded material was arranged in a period-by-theme matrix covering the four periods, from which Table 2 in Section 5 is drawn. Fourth, the

matrix was read across periods to identify what recurs and what changes. Fifth, patterns were interpreted through the theoretical framework in Section 4, and conclusions were treated as stronger where sources of different types, for example press history and legal scholarship, converged on the same point. Findings are labelled F1 to F6 in Section 5 so that each recommendation in Section 7 can be traced to its evidential base.

3.5 Data Sources

Table 1: Summary of secondary data sources

Source type	Sources	Number	Contribution to analysis
Historical and press studies	Omu (1968); Agbaje (1993); Olukotun (2002a, 2002b); Olukotun & Omole (2004); Adebanwi (2011)	6	Historical context for media and opposition politics under colonial, military, and early civilian rule
Communication studies	Ibelema (2003); Dambo et al. (2020); Abimbade et al. (2022); Akerele-Popoola et al. (2022)	4	Evidence on press performance, media framing, and protest mobilisation
Digital media analysis	Mohammed & Adelakun (2023); Elega et al. (2023); Muhammad Auwal & Ersoy (2024)	3	Data on the 2021 Twitter ban, its costs, and its coverage
Legal scholarship	Lawal et al. (2025)	1	Legal analysis of internet access as a human right and of regional court judgments
Total		14	

Note. Each source is assigned to its primary category; several studies also contribute to other categories.

3.6 Limitations of the Method

The study relies on secondary sources, so its findings are only as reliable as the evidence those sources contain. A synthesis of this kind carries a risk of interpretive bias, since the choice of sources and the coding frame reflect the authors' judgement; the explicit criteria and the extraction frame above are intended to make that judgement transparent. The corpus is concentrated on English-language scholarship, and digital records, particularly deleted or restricted posts, are fragile and may not be recoverable for later verification.

4. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on four bodies of theory. Rather than applying them mechanically, it asks what each can and cannot explain in the Nigerian case, and then integrates them.

4.1 Media History

Media history is used to analyse the transformation of media forms over time, from the printing press to guerrilla journals, pirate radio, and social media. Its limitation is a tendency toward periodisation by technology, which can imply that the medium determines the politics. This study addresses that risk by treating media as a shaping condition rather than a cause, as stated in Section 1, and by

holding the state's response constant as a separate variable.

4.2 State–Civil Society Relations

State–civil society relations theory is used to analyse the tension between the state's appetite for controlling dissenting media and citizens' capacity to resist. It underpins much of the Nigerian press literature (Agbaje, 1993). Its limitation is a focus on formal institutions such as newspapers, parties, and coalitions, and a corresponding neglect of informal, decentralised movements. The study addresses this by analysing the leaderless, decentralised character of EndSARS, which has no institutional equivalent in earlier periods.

4.3 Digital Rights Theory

Digital rights theory is used to analyse internet access as a human right and the legal framework for platform regulation, drawing on the legal analysis of Lawal et al. (2025). It can be criticised for Western-centric assumptions about institutions and enforcement. The study addresses this by grounding its analysis in the ECOWAS Court's rulings and the African Charter, that is, in a regional rather than imported framework, and by asking what those rulings imply for Nigeria specifically.

4.4 Agenda-Setting and Framing

Agenda-setting and framing theory is used to analyse how media narratives shape public understanding of opposition movements and of the state's response to them. Agenda-setting research holds that media coverage influences which issues the public regards as important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), and framing research holds that the way an issue is selected and presented shapes how it is interpreted (Entman, 1993). The study uses this approach to show that mainstream media retain influence over how a confrontation is narrated even when a movement organises outside the newsroom.

4.5 Original Application and Theoretical Contribution

Media history has been widely used to analyse the transformation of media forms, and state–civil society relations theory to analyse the tension between state and opposition. This study integrates both with digital rights theory, and supplements them with framing theory, to provide a single framework for analysing how successive media transformations have reconfigured opposition politics while the state's response has remained constant and its capacity to control has weakened. This integrated framework has not been fully developed in existing literature on Nigeria. The study contributes to theory by integrating media history, state–civil society relations, and digital rights theory to analyse the transformation of opposition politics in Nigeria, and by providing empirical evidence on the shifting balance of technical, economic, and legal power between the state and the citizen.

5. Results and Presentation of Data

The findings are organised around the research objectives. Table 2 summarises the comparative picture across the four periods; Sections 5.1 to 5.4 present the findings in detail and label them F1 to F6 for later reference. Objective (iii), the proposed framework, draws on F3 to F6 and is developed in Section 7.2.

Table 2: Media forms, state responses, and outcomes across four periods

Period	Dominant media and form of opposition	State response	Outcome reported in the literature
Colonial press (to 1960)	Nationalist newspapers, e.g., the West African Pilot, produced by educated Africans (Omu, 1968)	Selective prosecution and restraint, limited by political and practical factors; bans where the colonial interest was directly threatened	Press freedom contested and negotiated rather than granted or denied; a template for later governments
Military era (1966–1999)	Traditional protest media, guerrilla journals, and pirate radio (Radio Kudirat), run by an identifiable, clandestine leadership (Olukotun, 2002b)	Decree, proscription, jamming of stations, and detention of suspected operators	Civil society able to check the state to some extent; channels sustained partly by fractures within the state (Adebanwi, 2011)
Early Fourth Republic (1999–2003 in the literature)	Press and broadcast in a more open environment (Olukotun & Omole, 2004)	Inherited regulatory tools and habits used where coverage touched national security or state interest; telecommunications law not designed for speech	Gradual, uneven loosening of the control instinct; no settled doctrine on speech or platform access
Digital age (2020–2023)	EndSARS and Twitter: decentralised, with no single organisation, headquarters, or outlet (Abimbade et al., 2022)	Indefinite suspension of Twitter in June 2021 by executive announcement (Elega et al., 2023)	VPN workarounds, heavy economic cost, and regional court findings against such suspensions (Mohammed & Adelakun, 2023; Lawal et al., 2025)

Note. Sources for each period are cited in Sections 2 and 5.1 to 5.3.

5.1 Transformation of Media and Opposition Politics (Objective i)

F1: The organisation of opposition moved from institutions to networks. Opposition media of the colonial and military periods were produced and controlled by a defined leadership working through recognisable, if clandestine, institutions: a named newspaper in the first case, and guerrilla journals and a pirate radio station in the second (Olukotun, 2002b). EndSARS had no equivalent institution. Authority was distributed across thousands of individual accounts rather than concentrated in an editorial office or a coalition secretariat, and social media disseminated information, coordinated action, and built collective identity among participants who had no prior connection (Abimbade et al., 2022; Akerele-Popoola et al., 2022).

F2: Durable channels have depended on more than technology. Under military rule, the survival of underground media rested partly on fractures within the state itself (Adebanwi, 2011), and Radio Kudirat, broadcasting in four languages, reached audiences that print alone could not. In the digital era, by contrast, reach and durability came from low production costs and personal devices, though conventional media retained influence over how the confrontation was narrated (Muhammad Auwal & Ersoy, 2024).

5.2 The State's Response to Opposition Media (Objective ii)

F3: The state's instinct to control the channel has been constant, and no settled standard governs it. Across every period examined, the state treated the communication channel itself as the object of control, whether the target was a contested colonial-era press, underground radio and guerrilla journals in the 1990s, or a microblogging platform in 2021. In each period the state possessed ample legal and administrative tools to license, tax, and regulate a medium, but no settled doctrine for weighing the security interest it invoked against the political speech the medium carried. Colonial ordinances could ban a newspaper outright, as with the West African Pilot in 1945, without any requirement to show that the ban was proportionate to a demonstrated harm (Omu, 1968). Military decrees could proscribe a title or drive a station underground on the same unreviewable basis. The 2021 suspension followed the same logic: an executive announcement citing an undefined threat to Nigeria's corporate existence, issued without prior judicial verification and without a published, reviewable standard (Elega et al., 2023; Mohammed & Adelakun, 2023). Lawal et al. (2025) add that the Nigerian Communications Act of 2003 and the Universal Access and Service Regulations of 2007 were never designed to answer whether internet access should be treated as a protected right or as a discretionary service the state may switch off.

F4: Media framing affects how state–citizen confrontations unfold. Muhammad Auwal and Ersoy (2024) found that framing choices by the mainstream press during the first three months of the ban had a measurable bearing on how the dispute was understood by the public. Coverage that de-escalated, rather than escalated, the sense of confrontation was associated with reduced perceived conflict.

5.3 The Shifting Balance of Power Between State and Citizen

F5: The state's capacity to make control stick has weakened. A newspaper could be seized or proscribed, and a pirate radio station jammed or its suspected operators detained. A social media platform used by tens of millions of citizens on personal devices proved considerably more resistant to blanket suspension. The change is visible on three dimensions. Technically, a large majority of surveyed users kept accessing Twitter through VPNs. Economically, the suspension imposed a documented cost running into hundreds of millions of dollars within weeks, a pressure that a newspaper ban never had to contend with in quite the same way (both findings from Mohammed & Adelakun, 2023). Legally, for the first time in this history, a regional court was positioned to rule such a suspension unlawful: the ECOWAS Court found in SERAP v. Federal Republic of Nigeria, as in the Togolese case, that suspending internet or platform access violated rights under the African Charter and the ICCPR (Lawal et al., 2025). The balance of technical, economic, and legal power has thus moved, gradually and unevenly, in favour of the citizen.

5.4 Fragility of the Record

F6: The shift from institutional to platform-based opposition media creates a preservation problem. Guerrilla journals and Radio Kudirat left an institutional paper trail that later scholars could study systematically. A protest organised primarily through tweets, many since deleted, restricted, or rendered inaccessible by the platform's own policy changes, leaves a far more fragile record. This study's own source base illustrates the point: the digital-era studies depend on data sets and samples that later researchers may not be able to reconstruct.

6. Discussion of Findings

6.1 Theoretical Integration

The finding that the state's instinct to control dissenting media has remained constant across colonial, military, and civilian administrations (F3) supports the argument of state–civil society relations theory that the state's appetite for controlling opposition is a structural feature of Nigerian politics rather than a feature of any one regime. The finding that the state's capacity to control has weakened (F5) supports the digital rights argument that the cost of producing and distributing opposition content has fallen, shifting the balance of power in favour of the citizen, and the regional rulings discussed in Section 2.5 show that this shift now has a legal as well as a technical and economic dimension. Media history explains why the weakening could occur: each transformation of the medium changed what the state could physically interrupt. Framing theory explains why conventional media remain relevant (F4) even where a movement organises outside the newsroom.

The Nigerian case also qualifies the theories. State–civil society relations theory, with its focus on institutions, cannot by itself explain a leaderless movement such as EndSARS (F1); and digital rights theory, read as a Western import, would miss that the operative authority here is a regional court applying African instruments. The integrated framework therefore does explanatory work that no single theory does alone.

6.2 Synthesis Across the Objectives

Read across the three objectives, a single pattern emerges. What has changed about opposition politics in Nigeria is not the state's appetite for controlling dissenting media, which remained fairly constant across colonial, military, and civilian administrations. What has changed is the balance of technical, economic, and now legal power between the state and the citizen, a balance that has moved in the citizen's favour as the cost of producing and distributing opposition content has fallen and as regional human rights jurisprudence has begun, however belatedly, to catch up with the pattern this paper documents. The transformation (Objective i) is organisational; the continuity (Objective ii) lies in the state's response; and the unfinished business (Objective iii) is that the legal and regulatory architecture has not yet caught up with either.

6.3 Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings confirm, extend, and qualify the existing literature. They confirm Omu's (1968) account of press freedom as a negotiated rather than granted condition, and show that the negotiation has continued, with a changing set of tools, into the digital age. They extend Olukotun's (2002a, 2002b) account of underground media by showing that the guerrilla press and the pirate radio station were an early form of what the state later confronted at scale on social media, albeit under an institutional, leadership-driven model that EndSARS did not share. They qualify Adebanwi's (2011) finding of fractures within the state: the weakening of control in the digital era did not depend on such fractures but on technical workarounds, economic pressure, and external legal review. Relative to Mohammed and Adelakun (2023), who document the early weeks of the Twitter ban, this study shows that the ban was not a novel episode but followed the same logic as the colonial and military closures, and that its distinctive feature was the capacity of citizens and a regional court to resist it. Finally, the findings agree with Olukotun and Omole (2004) that the transition to civilian rule did not produce a clean break, and they show that the continuity they observed persisted into the platform era.

6.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

The consequences of the state's repeated recourse to channel-closing are clear from the record. It has never resolved the grievance that prompted it. It carries growing economic and legal costs. And it has, in the most recent instance, been found unlawful by a regional court. The proposed framework addresses these consequences by replacing improvisation with rules. A published, reviewable standard would require the state to specify the harm it seeks to prevent, which is a narrower and more defensible category than the undefined threat invoked in 2021. De-escalatory newsroom practice would reduce the risk that a suspension hardens into a prolonged standoff, such as the one Nigeria experienced for roughly seven months in 2021. Systematic digital preservation would safeguard the evidence on which future assessments of such episodes depend. These elements are developed as concrete recommendations in Section 7.2.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This paper has traced the media history of opposition politics in Nigeria from the colonial nationalist press through the underground journals and pirate radio of the military period to the EndSARS protests and the Twitter ban of the early 2020s. Across this history, the study identifies three broad regimes of media control: contested colonial censorship of the print press; military-era decree and clandestine broadcasting, met by a resilient if imperfect civil society response; and the more diffuse, harder to police, but not yet well-governed environment of social media.

Its central finding is that the state's instinct to control the communication channel has remained constant, while its capacity to make that control effective has weakened, so that the balance of technical, economic, and legal power has shifted toward the citizen. The study contributes an integrated, historically grounded account of this pattern and a theoretical framework combining media history, state–civil society relations, and digital rights theory. It also shows that Nigeria's repeated recourse to channel-closing is a specific, solvable problem rather than an inevitability.

7.2 Recommendations

Each recommendation is linked to the finding from which it derives.

- Adopt a published, judicially reviewable standard for platform suspension (F3, F5). Nigerian regulators should specify the harm to be prevented, require proportionality between the suspension and that harm, and set an automatic expiry date subject to renewal only through a transparent process, in place of the indefinite, unilateral suspensions that characterised every period from decree-era press bans to the 2021 shutdown.
- Operationalise existing human rights commitments (F3, F5). Nigeria should enact domestic legislation that operationalises its ratification of the African Charter and the ICCPR before the next crisis rather than after a regional court has ruled, as Lawal et al. (2025) argue that these instruments already supply the legal foundation.
- Adopt de-escalatory and proportionate reporting norms (F4). Journalists and platforms should adopt professional norms of de-escalatory framing during platform disputes to reduce the likelihood of prolonged standoffs. Such norms would not prevent a government from attempting an unlawful suspension, but they could reduce the likelihood that it escalates.

- Establish systematic digital-preservation partnerships (F6). National archival and university library institutions should partner with platforms and research bodies to safeguard the fragile record of decentralised, platform-based opposition movements, which is a precondition for writing this history a generation from now.

7.3 Limitations

The study relies on secondary sources and is therefore subject to the limits of the evidence those sources contain. It is open to interpretive bias in the selection and coding of material, and it faces the challenge that digital records are fragile and may not be preserved. It focuses on Nigeria and does not compare other African countries, so its claims about the weakening of state control are specific to the Nigerian case.

7.4 Future Research

Future studies should conduct comparative work across other African countries to test whether the pattern of constant state instinct and weakening capacity holds elsewhere. They should examine the effectiveness of specific digital-preservation initiatives, and they should explore the implications of these findings for other forms of online activism and for the enforcement of regional court judgments in domestic law.

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