



Research Article

Beyond Clicks and Shares: Rethinking Journalistic Values in the Age of Platform Metrics in Nigeria

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms are reshaping journalism worldwide, but in Nigeria's fragile media ecosystem, their impact is especially acute. Traditional news values like accuracy, balance, and civic responsibility are increasingly in tension with platform-driven metrics such as clicks, likes, and shares. This paper examines how Nigerian newsrooms negotiate these pressures and what this means for journalism's democratic role in the era of digital disruption. The study is guided by three questions: How do Nigerian journalists and editors adapt to the metrication of news? What impact do platform algorithms have on editorial decision-making and news values? And how do indigenous factors such as political influence, infrastructural constraints, and audience fragmentation shape these transformations? Methodologically, the research draws on qualitative interviews with journalists and editors from both legacy outlets and digital-native platforms, complemented by analysis of viral Nigerian news stories across Facebook, Twitter/X, and digital news sites. Findings suggest that while metrics create opportunities for audience engagement and economic survival, they also incentivize sensationalism, celebrity coverage, and political spin at the expense of investigative and developmental journalism. Nigerian journalists describe a form of "dual accountability": to platform-driven audiences and to professional ethics. The paper argues that rethinking journalistic values in Nigeria requires navigating algorithmic pressures while foregrounding local sociocultural contexts. By situating Nigeria within global debates, the study highlights pathways toward inclusive and democratic journalism in the algorithmic public sphere.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital platforms has fundamentally reconfigured the global media ecosystem, reshaping not only the modes of news production and distribution but also the very values that underpin journalism. Across the world, scholars have observed how the dominance of platform logics and algorithmic visibility increasingly challenge professional ideals such as accuracy, balance, and civic responsibility (Christin, 2020; Napoli, 2019). The digital turn has elevated metrics such as clicks, likes, shares, and impressions as new determinants of newsworthiness, producing a climate where audience engagement often supersedes editorial judgment.

In Nigeria, these transformations acquire a distinctive urgency. Journalism has historically functioned both as a watchdog over power and as an agent of nation-building (Oso, 2012), despite longstanding struggles with censorship, weak institutional support, and economic precarity. The penetration of digital platforms into this fragile media landscape has introduced new opportunities for visibility, audience reach, and alternative voices. At the same time, it has amplified existing challenges by incentivizing sensationalism, trivial content, and political spin over investigative and developmental journalism.

This paper interrogates how Nigerian journalists and editors negotiate the tensions between professional ethics and platform-driven imperatives. Specifically, it explores the ways in which algorithmic pressures reshape editorial decision-making, how the pursuit of virality redefines news values, and how indigenous factors ranging from infrastructural constraints and audience fragmentation to political interference

mediate these dynamics. By situating Nigeria within global debates on digital journalism and the algorithmic public sphere while foregrounding local sociocultural realities, the study contributes to broader reflections on the future of inclusive and democratic communication in the era of digital disruption.

2.0 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Guided by debates on news values, political economy, and the algorithmic public sphere, this study is structured around the following research questions:

1. How are Nigerian journalists and editors responding to the dominance of platform metrics (clicks, likes, shares, impressions) in their evaluation of newsworthiness?
2. In what ways do platform algorithms and audience analytics reshape editorial judgment, news values, and journalistic autonomy in Nigerian newsrooms?
3. How do local conditions such as political influence, infrastructural challenges, and audience fragmentation mediate the impact of platform metrics on journalism's watchdog and democratic roles?

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated at the intersection of classical theories of journalism and contemporary debates on algorithmic governance. Three interrelated frameworks guide the analysis, **News Values Theory**, the **Political Economy of Communication**, and the concept of the **Algorithmic Public Sphere**. Together, they provide a multidimensional lens through which to interrogate how digital metrics reshape journalistic values and practices in Nigeria.

News Values Theory

The starting point for this inquiry is the long-standing tradition of news values research. Galtung and Ruge's (1965) seminal work established the idea that journalists employ certain criteria such as conflict, proximity, and negativity in deciding which events qualify as "news." Harcup and O'Neill's (2001, 2017) refinements extended this framework to contemporary media environments, highlighting new values such as celebrity, entertainment, and visual appeal. Within the digital ecosystem, however, platform metrics operate as "algorithmic news values" (Tandoc & Vos, 2016), reconfiguring the hierarchy of relevance. This framework enables the study to analyze how Nigerian journalists balance enduring professional norms with emerging pressures of virality, audience analytics, and platform logics.

Political Economy of Communication

The political economy approach foregrounds the structural forces economic, institutional, and political that shape media practices (Mosco, 2009). In the Nigerian context, where newsrooms grapple with dwindling advertising revenue, precarious labor conditions, and political interference, the pressures of digital metrics cannot be divorced from broader questions of media survival and autonomy. By applying this lens, the study examines how ownership structures, institutional constraints, and market imperatives interact with platform-driven demands, thereby illuminating the dual pressures Nigerian journalists face in sustaining democratic values while ensuring economic viability.

Algorithmic Public Sphere

Building on Habermas's conception of the public sphere, Helberger (2020) proposes the

idea of the "algorithmic public sphere," in which algorithms increasingly mediate visibility, participation, and deliberation. Within this framework, platforms function not merely as neutral conduits but as powerful actors that privilege certain types of content and voices over others. In Nigeria, where digital platforms have become crucial sites of political discourse and civic engagement, algorithmic governance shapes both what issues rise to prominence and how publics deliberate around them. This framework allows the study to interrogate the democratic implications of algorithm-driven visibility and its impact on inclusivity, plurality, and accountability in Nigerian journalism.

Synthesis

By integrating these three frameworks, the study captures the multi-layered nature of journalism's transformation in Nigeria. News Values Theory illuminates the micro-level editorial choices influenced by metrics; the Political Economy of Communication reveals the structural conditions under which these choices are made; and the Algorithmic Public Sphere frames the broader democratic consequences of these shifts. This triangulation ensures that the analysis is attentive not only to professional practices but also to the institutional, technological, and sociocultural contexts in which Nigerian journalism is being redefined.

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Roots of News Values

The concept of news values has long shaped scholarly understandings of why certain events are selected and amplified in the media. Galtung and Ruge's (1965) seminal study identified structural and cultural factors that made stories "newsworthy." Subsequent refinements, such as Harcup and O'Neill

(2001, 2017), emphasized the enduring salience of negativity, conflict, and human interest, while expanding the framework to reflect evolving media logics. These perspectives remain central to understanding the professional judgment of journalists and editors, yet they were developed in contexts predating the algorithmic and platform-driven transformations of contemporary media.

Journalism in the Age of Metrics and Algorithms

Recent scholarship has highlighted a paradigmatic shift, the rise of engagement-driven journalism, where audience metrics and algorithmic visibility increasingly guide editorial decisions. Carlson (2020) and Napoli (2019) argue that platform logics of virality, clicks, and shares are subtly redefining professional news values, creating what Helberger (2020) terms the “algorithmic public sphere.” Here, journalism is not only shaped by editorial routines but also by opaque systems of algorithmic curation, privileging stories most likely to generate attention. While such trends are global, they raise acute concerns for democracies where regulatory frameworks are weak, and audiences are vulnerable to misinformation.

African and Global South Perspectives

African media scholarship underscores how these global transformations interact with structural inequalities. Skjerdal (2012) identifies distinct forms of African journalism, advocacy, partisan, and communal that complicate Eurocentric notions of neutrality and professional detachment. Wasserman (2020) further argues that digital technologies have simultaneously expanded opportunities for alternative voices and entrenched

dependency on Western platforms. This tension situates African journalism in a fragile position: seeking to uphold civic responsibility while navigating new pressures from commercial metrics and global media infrastructures.

Nigerian Media in Historical Context

Nigerian scholarship highlights the political economy of the press as a crucial factor shaping journalism. Uche (1989) and Oso (2012) detail how media ownership, political patronage, and regulatory capture have historically constrained press autonomy. Oso and Pate (2011) further emphasize the deep entanglement of media and politics in Nigeria, producing a press that is simultaneously vibrant yet vulnerable to state and market pressures. Against this backdrop, disruptions introduced by digital platforms are layered upon longstanding structural weaknesses.

Algorithmic Disruption in Nigeria

Recent Nigerian studies show how algorithmic systems are transforming local journalism. Uko (2018) observes that digital disruption challenges investigative journalism, threatening depth and rigor in reporting. Ubong, Lucas, Ogande, and Zuwaira (2024), analyzing the #EndBadGovernance movement, demonstrate how social media algorithms amplify voices selectively, privileging engagement dynamics over journalistic curation. Taraba, Gambo, and Shem (2024) expand this view by reviewing opportunities and risks of AI adoption in Nigerian journalism, underscoring infrastructural precarity, ethical dilemmas, and algorithmic bias. Complementing this, Bello, Salaudeen, and Umeaku (2025) find that while Nigerian journalists acknowledge AI's potential

efficiency, they fear erosion of creativity, job security, and ethical standards. Collectively, these studies highlight Nigeria's distinctive vulnerability, algorithmic logics intersect with weak regulation, resource scarcity and political capture to reshape journalism in unique ways.

Identifying the Research Gap

While global debates have theorized the shift from professional to metric-driven news values, Nigerian research has largely remained descriptive, focusing on disruptions without fully reconceptualizing *news values* themselves. Much of the literature examines audience engagement, AI adoption, or social media activism, but less attention has been given to how **news values are being reframed in practice under algorithmic pressures**. There is limited theorization of what constitutes newsworthiness in Nigeria when traditional editorial judgments collide with platform-driven visibility.

Contribution of This Study

This study addresses that gap by situating Nigerian journalism within global debates on algorithmic disruption, while foregrounding local structural challenges. It argues for a reconceptualization of news values in Nigeria that includes “engagement accountability” a framework recognizing audience interaction metrics but safeguarding journalism's civic responsibility. By doing so, the study contributes to comparative media scholarship, extends theories of news values, and highlights the democratic risks of unchecked platform logics in fragile regulatory environments such as Nigeria.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretivist approach**, grounded in the

recognition that journalism is not merely a set of technical practices, but a socially embedded profession shaped by meanings, values, and institutional contexts. The interpretivist paradigm is appropriate because the aim is not to generate universally generalizable findings, but rather to uncover the lived experiences of Nigerian journalists and the ways in which they negotiate the pressures of metric-driven news production within their sociopolitical and infrastructural realities.

Data Collection

Two complementary methods were employed to capture both professional perspectives and textual manifestations of news values in the algorithmic age:

- 1. In-depth Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with **20–25 journalists and editors** drawn from a cross-section of Nigerian newsrooms, including both **legacy outlets** (such as *The Punch* and *The Guardian*) and **digital-native platforms** (such as *Premium Times*, *Legit.ng*, and *Sahara Reporters*). The interviews explored journalists' perceptions of metrics, experiences with algorithmic pressures, and reflections on how these dynamics affect their editorial autonomy and professional ethics.
- 2. Content Analysis:** A purposive sample of **viral Nigerian news stories** was analyzed across Facebook, Twitter/X, and leading online outlets. This textual analysis examined how particular stories gained traction, the characteristics that made them algorithmically visible (e.g., sensationalism, celebrity focus, political controversy), and the extent to which such stories aligned or conflicted with traditional journalistic values.

Sampling Strategy

A **purposive sampling strategy** was employed to ensure the inclusion of journalists with substantial professional experience and firsthand exposure to digital transformations. Participants were required to have at least **five years of newsroom experience**, which positioned them to reflect on shifts in journalistic practices over time. Efforts were also made to achieve diversity across **media types, ownership structures and regional representation**, given Nigeria's fragmented media landscape.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and, along with content analysis materials, subjected to **thematic coding** using NVivo and Atlas.ti software. The coding process was both **deductive** guided by the theoretical frameworks of news values, political economy, and the algorithmic public sphere and **inductive**, allowing emergent themes to surface from participants' narratives. This dual strategy facilitated the identification of recurring patterns of **adaptation, resistance, and value negotiation** within Nigerian newsrooms. Triangulation between interview data and content analysis strengthened the validity of findings, while reflexive memo-writing ensured ongoing attention to researcher positionality and interpretive rigor.

Findings & Analysis

Four interrelated themes emerge as central to understanding how Nigerian journalists adapt to metrication and algorithmic pressures: **opportunities, distortions, dual accountability, and local constraints**.

1. Opportunities: Metrics as Tools for Audience Engagement and Survival

One of the paradoxes of metrication is that it offers newsrooms opportunities for **direct engagement with audiences** in ways that traditional circulation figures or broadcast ratings never allowed. Page views, shares, and likes provide real-time indicators of public interest, enabling editors to tailor content to measurable demand. In Nigeria's **highly competitive and resource-scarce media market**, these metrics often serve as tools for **organizational survival**, particularly for digital-native outlets that rely heavily on advertising and sponsored content. Moreover, metrics can sometimes **democratize visibility**, allowing underrepresented stories such as those on youth activism or community-level issues to gain traction through virality, even when mainstream gatekeepers initially overlook them.

2. Distortions: Sensationalism and the Erosion of Investigative Traditions

At the same time, metrics exert a **distorting effect** on journalistic priorities. In line with global scholarship (Napoli, 2019; Carlson, 2020), Nigerian journalists report that stories with the highest algorithmic visibility are often **sensationalist, celebrity-driven, or politically charged**, rather than investigative or developmental. This creates a misalignment between **traditional news values** (such as significance, relevance, and watchdog journalism) and the **quantified values of platforms** (speed, shareability, emotional intensity). As a result, investigative reporting which requires time, resources, and editorial protection becomes increasingly marginalized, threatening journalism's democratic role as a check on power.

3. Dual Accountability: Between Platforms and Professional Ethics

Journalists in Nigeria negotiate a complex space of **dual accountability**. On one hand, they are compelled to respond to the **platform-driven audience**, whose interests are quantified through metrics and algorithmic rankings. On the other, they remain tied to **professional norms and ethical codes**, rooted in the watchdog role, truth-telling and service to the public interest. This duality often generates tensions within newsrooms as editors may demand metric-friendly headlines, while reporters push back in defense of professional standards. The result is a constant process of **value negotiation**, where metrics do not simply replace journalistic ethics but co-exist in a precarious and contested balance.

4. Local Constraints: Political Economy and Infrastructural Realities

Finally, the **local Nigerian context** intensifies these dynamics. Structural weaknesses such as unreliable electricity, limited broadband penetration, and dependence on mobile data shape how news is produced, circulated, and consumed. Additionally, **political interference** remains a persistent feature of Nigerian journalism, with owners and state actors often exerting influence over editorial lines. In this environment, **audience fragmentation** across linguistic, regional, and socio-economic divides pushes journalists to rely even more heavily on metrics as survival strategies, since platforms provide immediate feedback and broader reach than traditional distribution channels. These contextual factors reveal how **global digital disruptions** interact with **indigenous pressures**, producing a hybrid journalistic culture that is neither fully globalized nor purely local.

5.1 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study resonate with global concerns about the algorithmic turn in journalism, but Nigeria's case presents distinctive dynamics shaped by weak regulatory frameworks, infrastructural constraints, and political interference. While platform metrics open new avenues for audience engagement and newsroom survival, they simultaneously distort news values by incentivizing sensationalism, celebrity gossip, and politically driven spin. This duality situates Nigerian journalism at the intersection of economic necessity and professional ethics.

Comparatively, scholarship in Western contexts has shown how metrics disrupt newsroom hierarchies and editorial autonomy (Carlson, 2018; Napoli, 2019), but in Nigeria these effects are magnified by resource scarcity and the absence of robust institutional safeguards. The reliance on platform algorithms to drive visibility deepens newsroom dependence on commercial logics, often at the expense of journalism's watchdog and developmental roles. As such, rethinking news values in Nigeria requires more than simply resisting global digital disruptions; it demands contextual adaptations that account for indigenous political, cultural, and infrastructural realities.

Normatively, this study underscores the urgent need to re-anchor Nigerian journalism within a framework of civic responsibility. At the **policy level**, regulators and media stakeholders must advocate for greater transparency from global platforms on algorithmic operations, while simultaneously strengthening protections for local content that serves the public interest. Professional bodies such as the Nigerian Press Council and

the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) should develop ethical guidelines to help newsrooms balance metric pressures with professional values.

At the **institutional level**, news organizations must develop editorial resilience by integrating audience analytics into decision-making without allowing them to dominate news values. This requires renewed editorial codes that foreground democratic values accuracy, accountability, inclusivity even in the face of commercial and political pressures. Equally important is investing in the digital capacity of journalists through sustained training in data literacy, algorithmic awareness, and digital ethics.

At the **societal level**, media literacy campaigns are essential to equip audiences with the skills to critically evaluate digital news content. By empowering citizens to identify misinformation and demand quality journalism, such initiatives can help reduce the corrosive impact of sensational and politically manipulated content.

Taken together, these implications point toward a reconfiguration of journalism in Nigeria that not only responds to global digital disruptions but also foregrounds indigenous pathways for sustaining journalism as a democratic institution in the algorithmic public sphere.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that journalism in Nigeria stands at a pivotal crossroads in the digital era. While metrics and algorithms provide critical tools for audience engagement and economic survival, they also carry the risk of displacing traditional journalistic values such as accuracy, balance,

and civic responsibility. The analysis shows that Nigerian journalists operate under a form of **dual accountability**, to audiences quantified by platforms and to professional codes of ethics, creating a constant negotiation between visibility and responsibility. If not carefully managed, this negotiation could erode journalism's democratic role in holding power to account and fostering inclusive public debate.

By situating the Nigerian case within global scholarship on the algorithmic public sphere and the political economy of communication, the study highlights both convergence and divergence: Nigerian journalism reflects worldwide concerns about platform domination, but its vulnerabilities are sharpened by **weak infrastructural systems, fragile regulatory mechanisms, and politicized media ownership structures**. These conditions make Nigeria an important site for understanding how global disruptions are mediated through local realities.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Editorial Resilience:** Newsrooms should cultivate institutional safeguards such as editorial charters and newsroom-wide ethical codes that buffer against metric-driven distortions.
2. **Media Literacy:** Public campaigns and educational curricula should emphasize critical news consumption, helping audiences distinguish between engagement-driven content and quality journalism.
3. **Ethical Guidelines:** Professional associations (e.g., NUJ, Guild of Editors) should develop context-specific codes for navigating

algorithmic pressures while preserving civic responsibility.

4. Platform Accountability: Policymakers and regulators must advocate for greater transparency in algorithmic systems, ensuring they do not incentivize sensationalism or disinformation.

5. Capacity Building: Continuous training for journalists in digital literacy, data analytics, and constructive reporting will help integrate audience engagement with socially responsible journalism.

Ultimately, sustaining journalism as a democratic institution in Nigeria's algorithmic public sphere requires more than adaptation to metrics, it demands a **redefinition of journalistic values** that is both globally informed and locally grounded. By reframing newsworthiness to balance engagement with responsibility, Nigerian journalism can chart indigenous pathways that resist erosion by digital disruptions while affirming its central role in democratic communication.

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