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The Moral Dearth of Politicians and the Role of the Media in Holding Politicians Accountable in Southeast Nigeria, 2010-2023

Igwealor Geraldine Chiagozie

Department of History and International Studies
Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe
geraldineagozie@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

This study examines the moral dearth of politicians in Southeast Nigeria and the role of the media in ensuring accountability between 2010 and 2023. Anchored on the Social Responsibility Theory, the research highlights the critical role of the media in exposing unethical behavior, corruption, and malfeasance by public officeholders, while also addressing challenges faced by the media in discharging its watchdog function. Using a mixed-method approach, the study collected data from 394 respondents, revealing significant insights into the moral shortcomings of political leaders and the media's effectiveness. Results show that the moral failings of politicians significantly erode public trust in governance. Also, political and economic pressures undermined the media's capacity to hold politicians accountable. The findings highlighted the need for ethical political leadership and a free, independent press to foster democratic accountability and national development. The study concluded by recommending stronger ethical standards for politicians and measures to protect media independence from political and economic pressures. These actions are crucial for enhancing transparency, public trust, and effective governance in Southeast Nigeria.

Keywords: Moral dearth, political accountability, media independence, public trust, corruption, democratic governance.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Nigeria has grappled with an escalating crisis of trust in its political leadership, particularly in the Southeast region, due to widespread allegations of corruption, maladministration, and moral lapses among politicians. The term "moral dearth" aptly encapsulates the profound ethical deficit that citizens and observers associate with the behavior and decision-making of Nigerian politicians (Okibe, 2020). This moral deficiency manifests in several ways, including the blatant disregard for public interests, abuse of power, lack of transparency, and a persistent failure to deliver essential services (World Bank, 2020). These shortcomings have had far-reaching consequences for democratic governance, socio-economic development, and public trust in the Southeast, which comprises states like Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo. Against this backdrop, the role of the media as a watchdog—tasked with holding politicians accountable—becomes critically important.

In this context, the media's role as the "Fourth Estate" of democracy is both indispensable and fraught with challenges. Ideally, the media should serve as a counterbalance to political power by exposing corruption, highlighting governance failures, and advocating for transparency and accountability (Tsgyu & Ogoshi, 2016). However, in Southeast Nigeria, the media often struggles to fulfill this role due to political interference, intimidation, and economic constraints. Journalists and media organizations frequently face threats, coercion, and, in some cases, violence from political actors who seek to suppress dissent and critical reporting (Musa & Antwi-Boateng, 2023). These challenges hinder the media's ability to function independently and undermine its capacity to act as an effective watchdog. One of the most troubling aspects of the moral failings among politicians in Southeast Nigeria is the pervasive culture of impunity. Political elites often operate with the belief that they are above the law and can act without fear of consequences (Yagboyaju, 2017). This culture is reinforced by weak legal and institutional frameworks that fail to hold politicians accountable, even when compelling evidence of corruption and ethical misconduct exists. Investigative reports and media exposés frequently fail to result in meaningful legal action or policy reforms, leaving the public disillusioned and fostering a sense of helplessness. The shielding of corrupt politicians from prosecution or disciplinary action further erodes public confidence in governance and deepens the ethical crisis (Iyamah & Onyishi, 2024).

Despite these challenges, the media in Southeast Nigeria has shown resilience and adaptability in addressing political and moral issues. Investigative journalism has emerged as a critical tool for exposing corrupt practices and raising public awareness about governance failures. By leveraging both traditional and digital platforms, journalists have been able to reach broader audiences and engage citizens in discussions on accountability and governance. Social media, in particular, has transformed the media landscape, offering alternative channels for reporting and facilitating direct citizen engagement. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have enabled the public to bypass traditional media restrictions and participate in

holding politicians accountable (Aideloje, Sylvester & Jacintha, 2024). This digital transformation has amplified the media's capacity to expose unethical conduct and foster greater transparency.

The media's role in promoting transparency and good governance is critical not only for deterring political corruption but also for fostering a political culture that values integrity and ethical behavior. By scrutinizing the actions, decisions, and policies of politicians, the media can serve as an agent of social change, encouraging accountability and strengthening democratic institutions (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, n.d.). However, the success of this role depends on the extent to which the media is supported and protected by the state and civil society. Legal frameworks that guarantee press freedom, financial resources for investigative journalism, and protections against harassment and intimidation are essential for empowering the media to perform its duties effectively.

The Nigerian Constitution guarantees press freedom, but the reality often falls short of this ideal. Weak enforcement of legal protections, coupled with government actions that suppress dissent, undermines the media's independence (Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development, 2022). Regulatory bodies like the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) sometimes act in ways that favor the political elite, further eroding public trust in the media. Additionally, the economic realities of operating media organizations in Nigeria pose significant challenges. Financial constraints often limit the ability of journalists to conduct in-depth investigations, while reliance on political advertisements and patronage can influence editorial decisions and compromise journalistic integrity (Udogwu & Ebuka, 2024).

This research seeks to critically examine the interplay between the moral failings of politicians and the media's role in holding them accountable in Southeast Nigeria. By exploring the systemic and institutional factors that perpetuate unethical behavior among politicians and hinder media effectiveness, the study aims to propose actionable solutions for promoting transparency, good governance, and ethical leadership. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to strengthen democratic governance and socio-economic development in the region.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the moral dearth of politicians in Southeast Nigeria and the role of the media in holding them accountable. Specifically, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess the moral shortcomings of political leaders in Southeast Nigeria.

2. To examine the role of the media in holding politicians accountable.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

i. What are the moral shortcomings of political leaders in Southeast Nigeria?

ii. What role does the media play in holding politicians accountable in Southeast Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses will guide this study:

1. H_0: There is no significant relationship between the moral shortcomings of political leaders in Southeast Nigeria and the level of public trust in governance.

2. H_0: The effectiveness of the media in holding politicians accountable in Southeast Nigeria is not significantly influenced by political interference and economic pressures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Morality

Virtually all the moral philosophers agree that morality has a Latin etymological background. According to Plantin (2021), morality comes from the Latin word *moralis*, a term which he held to have been coined by Cicero in order to translate the Greek word *ethos*, which means habit or custom. Bartneck, Lütge, Wagner and Welsh (2021) supported this view when he argued that ethics and morality are synonymous; he further submits that the difference lies in the fact that whereas ethics comes from a Greek word *ethos* meaning character or customs, morality is derived from a Latin word *mores* meaning custom, habit, and way of life.

From the foregoing assertions, it is now obvious that morality as a concept in its etymological sense refers to conduct, principles, rightness, and correct ordering or living. Thus, we can define morality as the standard and principle that guide and judge human conduct. It guides human behavior in the sense that morality, as also known of ethics, sets out to explain what we ought to do at a particular point of time in relation to the place and the receiver(s) of the action performed. This makes Agbanusi (2015) submit that ethics, as a branch of philosophy, is a study that deals with the morality of human conduct. Human conduct in this sense connotes human actions that are performed voluntarily in the form of enterprise, effort, exploits, undertaking, work, or activity carried out by a person or a group of persons at a given period of time. Morality comes into the issue of human action when we consider the nature of the action in relation to what is obtainable as the standard of behavior in society, in order to determine the goodness or

badness, rightness or wrongness, correctness or incorrectness of the action, especially in relation to the performer of the action and its effects on the people in the environment where the action is being performed.

It is very important that the actions of every individual in society conform to the standard of morality that guides the community. This is because man is a social being, who cannot live a solitary life; therefore, his actions have effects on the people of society. If he does good things, the society will be peaceful and people will live in harmony, but if he does evil or wickedness, it will also have negative effects on society. A society that has no sense of morality is not worthy of living, and it cannot be referred to as a society, for the activities of the people in such a society can only be likened to that of the state of nature as described by Thomas Hobbes, where everybody performs actions as he or she pleases. It is through the establishment of a moral system of rules that people are able to treat others "in ways that make for harmonious living" in the community (Onyagholo & Ekad, 2022). In his attempt to define the concept of morality, Olanipekun (2017) opined that a moral system encompasses beliefs about the nature of man, beliefs about ideals—such as what is good, desirable, or worthy of pursuit for its own sake—rules that establish what ought to be done and what ought not to be done, and motives that incline individuals to choose the right course of action.

Media

According to Logan (2019), media are not merely channels for transmitting information but are powerful tools that extend human capabilities, reshaping the way individuals perceive and interact with the world around them. Logan builds on the ideas of renowned theorist Marshall McLuhan, who argued that media have a transformative effect on society by influencing not only the way people communicate but also the broader social and cultural landscapes. McLuhan's famous assertion, "the medium is the message," underscores the idea that the medium itself, whether it be print, television, radio, or digital platforms, plays a far more significant role than the actual content it delivers.

Moreover, Logan argued that each medium contributes to the construction of social norms and values. Media, by shaping how individuals interpret their environment, influence societal perceptions, behaviors, and even political or economic structures. For instance, television advertisements may influence consumer behavior, while social media platforms shape political opinions and facilitate social movements. These media forms, through their design and modes of engagement, help construct social reality, often reinforcing or challenging existing power structures.

Wikipedia (2024) defines media in terms of its essential function in the communication process. It describes media as the various channels through which information flows from a source to a receiver. These channels include a wide range of platforms, such as television, radio, newspapers, social media, and digital technologies, which serve as conduits for transmitting messages. The role of media is not limited to the mere dissemination of information; it extends to shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of the receiver. As the information reaches the audience, media can influence public opinion by framing the way issues are perceived, altering individuals' attitudes toward certain topics, and even guiding their actions or decisions. This influence is often evident in political campaigns, advertising, and social movements, where media acts as a tool for persuasion, education, and sometimes manipulation. Through its reach and impact, media plays a pivotal role in shaping the public consciousness, guiding societal norms, and influencing the decisions made by individuals and groups within society.

Cela (2015) offers a critical perspective on the role of media, focusing on its function within the public sphere. He contends that media is not merely a tool for the dissemination of information, but rather a vital platform for public discourse, where citizens are able to engage in rational discussions on key societal issues. In his view, media serves as an essential space for democratic deliberation, allowing individuals to debate policies, political agendas, and social matters. This, according to Cela, is crucial for fostering an informed and active citizenry, which is the foundation of a functioning democracy. He also emphasizes that the media should empower individuals by providing them with access to diverse viewpoints, thus promoting critical thinking and public participation in governance. He argues that a well-functioning media system is integral to the health of democratic societies, as it facilitates transparency, accountability, and open discourse on public affairs.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm social responsibility theory of the media in 1956. The theory owes its origin to an American initiative that arose out of the 1947 Hutchins Commission on the freedom of the press (Sunny & Okechukwu, 2013). The emergence of this theory came as an attempt to provide restraint to the extreme press freedom advocated by the libertarian theory of 1947. The impression here is to ensure the press does not abuse the freedom at its disposal. The social responsibility theory stated that the near-monopoly position of the media imposes on them an obligation to be socially responsible in discharging their duties to the society (Amedu & Abioye, 2020). The theory explains that the media owe the society a duty to discharge their responsibility responsibly. While highlighting the main principles, the social responsibility theory asserts that the media should accept and accomplish certain media obligations to the society. These obligations include the effective discharge of the surveillance function, serving as watchdog of the society and disseminating information as factual as possible. Also, while writing on media surveillance as a social responsibility function, another study asserts that "people need to know if the streets are blocked or dangerous, some of those planning to drive or walk through the area of a disturbance may choose another route if they are told what is happening" and further warned that "a news blackout sets a dangerous precedent. Word-of-mouth and rumors are likely to be even less accurate than the mass media. And if serious grievances have festered to the point of a riot, the public has a right to know" (Sunny & Okechukwu, 2013).

From the foregoing and supporting this with Section 22 of the Nigerian Constitution (Amended), the citizens look up to the media professionals to keep them abreast of unfolding events and give reports without bias on holding the public officer holders accountable in the discharge of their duties. The assumption here is that media professionals, as members of the society, also have contributions to make to the betterment of the democratic governance of the country as accountability will foster development and growth.

The theory emphasizes that the media, due to their influential position, have a responsibility to serve society by disseminating accurate, relevant, and timely information. This responsibility extends to ensuring that politicians are held accountable for their actions, especially when ethical or moral concerns arise. In the context of the moral dearth among politicians in Southeast Nigeria, the media plays a crucial role in exposing unethical behavior, corruption, and any malfeasance by public office holders. The media's surveillance function becomes vital in shedding light on actions that undermine public trust and governance. As suggested by the Social Responsibility Theory, the media should be vigilant in reporting on the actions of politicians, providing citizens with the information necessary to evaluate their leaders' performance.

Empirical Review

Okibe and Onyekachi (2020) examine the relationship between corruption and democratic governance in Nigeria, highlighting how these issues undermine national development. The study argues that transparency, a core principle of democracy, is severely compromised by corruption, leading to poor governance and hindering public participation in decision-making. The authors note that corruption contradicts democratic practices and creates significant challenges for both academic discourse and practical governance. Using post-colonial state theory and content analysis, the study reveals that corruption, driven by a lack of transparency, damages institutional capacity and stifles infrastructural development. The authors recommend a comprehensive transformation of the political system, emphasizing the need to strengthen good governance, restore public trust, and eradicate corruption to foster national development.

Nguvese (2014) examined the influence of ownership on radio news coverage. Categories of media ownership in Nigeria are privately owned and government owned, but the researcher concentrated more on government-owned media, as it is the researcher's area of study. The aim of the study was to determine the influence of ownership on radio news coverage, specifically whether the news covered is oriented towards the owner's interests or the public's interests. A survey of the selected broadcasting stations' news coverage for a period of two weeks was carried out using questionnaires. The data obtained were used to obtain the frequency for the study. The data were analyzed using the simple percentage method and chi-square. This was used to obtain the percentage prominence and the degree of freedom of news coverage in the study. The result of the analysis revealed that radio news coverage is highly influenced by the owner's (government) interests, and the news covered is more aligned with the owner's interests rather than the public's. The research also showed that the government has a significant influence on radio news coverage. Recommendations were made based on the study, suggesting that the government should interfere less in the running of the station and focus more on subventions and overall performance, using the station as a tool for national development, covering news that is oriented toward the public's interests rather than the owner's.

The study by Ugochukwu, Nwanchor, Chike, Obiageri, and Idowu (2023) examines the security challenges in Nigeria, particularly the threats posed by insurgent groups, bandits, and unknown gunmen. These groups operate almost unhindered, causing significant loss of lives, property, and economic setbacks, while also restricting freedom of movement. The study aims to evaluate the role of mass media in addressing these security challenges. Using a literature review method and anchored on the Democratic Peace Theory, the study highlights that Nigerians rely heavily on the mass media for accurate and timely information. The media's traditional roles of informing, educating, and entertaining are seen as vital for national progress, and Nigeria cannot make meaningful strides without effectively utilizing these communication channels. While the media faces various challenges in the fight against insecurity, it still has a significant influence in combating the issue. The study concludes that the media has not been fully utilized in addressing security challenges in Nigeria. Based on these findings, the study recommends that the government adopt a dialogue-based approach to addressing security issues, rather than relying solely on force. It also advocates for journalists to use the mass media as agents of social change, intensifying their efforts to set public agendas on ways to overcome insecurity. Additionally, the study suggests organizing periodic media security summits to encourage public input on securing the country and ensuring that security agents collaborate with intelligence sources to avoid falling victim to insecurity.

Okwuchukwu (2014) examines the influence of media ownership and control on media agenda setting in Nigeria. The study utilized in-depth interviews and employed cluster and purposive sampling methods to gather data from individuals with extensive knowledge of the Nigerian media landscape. The research found that most media organizations in Nigeria are owned by various levels of government, high-ranking public and private officials, politicians, and influential businesspeople. These groups, referred to as the "ruling elite," are the primary "news makers" whose views dominate the content disseminated by the media. The study concluded that the ownership and control patterns in Nigerian media restrict its ability to independently shape the public agenda.

Abubakre (2017) explores the impact of media ownership on press coverage of the 2015 presidential election campaign in Nigeria. The study uses content analysis to assess the coverage of news items from the two main political parties, the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC), in *The Nation* and *Nigerian Tribune* between January and March 2015. The findings reveal that both newspapers exhibited biased coverage, though there were instances of objectivity and balance. The study concludes that the editorial content largely mirrored the political inclinations of the newspapers' owners.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study examined the moral dearth of politicians and the role of the media in ensuring accountability in Southeast Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was adopted to collect data systematically, allowing for the analysis of trends and relationships. The study focused on Anambra and Imo States**,** chosen for their political and media vibrancy, within the Southeast region. The population included politicians, media professionals, civil society members, and residents, ensuring diverse perspectives. The total population for Anambra and Imo States was 11,412,800. Using the Taro Yamane

formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 400 respondents was determined. A multistage sampling method was used, beginning with the selection of senatorial districts, followed by Local Government Areas (LGAs) and specific communities.

A structured questionnaire served as the primary data collection tool. It included both closed-ended questions, primarily using a Likert scale, and open-ended questions for qualitative insights. The instrument's validity was confirmed through expert reviews and alignment with the study's objectives, while reliability was tested through a pilot study, achieving a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient above 0.70. Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, summarized demographic and key variables. Chi-square analysis was used to test hypotheses and examine relationships, with a significance level of $p < 0.05$. These methods ensured a rigorous and comprehensive understanding of the interaction between politicians and the media in Southeast Nigeria.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Data of Respondents

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage%
Male	143	36.3%
Female	251	63.7%
Total	394	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 3 indicates the gender distribution of the respondents who participated in the study. Out of the 394 valid responses received, 143 respondents (36.3%) were male, while 251 respondents (63.7%) were female.

Table 2: Age of Respondents

Range	Frequency	Percentage
28-35	83	21.1%
36-46	169	42.9%
47 and above	142	36%
Total	394	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 4 provides the age distribution of the respondents, categorizing them into three age groups. Among the 394 valid responses, the largest proportion of respondents falls within the age range of 36–46 years, accounting for 169 individuals (42.9%). This group represents a substantial portion of the study population, suggesting that individuals in this age range are likely the most actively engaged or relevant to the study's context.

Table 3: Educational Qualification

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage

Level of Education	Frequency	Percentage
WAEC	92	23.4%
OND/NCE	158	40.1%
B.Sc/HND	144	36.5%
Total	394	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024

Table 5 outlines the educational qualifications of the respondents, categorized into three levels. Among the 394 valid responses**,** the largest proportion of respondents, 158 individuals (40.1%)**,** possess OND/NCE qualifications**.** This suggests that a considerable segment of the study population has attained mid-level tertiary education, which may reflect the demographic's educational composition and relevance to the study topic.

4.2 Data on Variables of Subject of Investigation

Research Question one: What are the moral shortcomings of political leaders in Southeast Nigeria?

Table 4: Moral Shortcomings of Political Leaders

S/N	Item Description	SA	A	UN	D	SD	Total
1	Political leaders often prioritize personal gains over public welfare.	155 (39.3%)	102 (25.9%)	2 [0.5%]	73 [18.5%]	62 [15.7%]	394
2	Political leaders frequently engage in corrupt practices or nepotism.	168 [42.7%]	137 [34.8%]	3 [0.8%]	46 [11.7%]	40 [10.2%]	394
3	Political leaders exhibit a disconnection from ethical and moral standards in their actions.	149 [37.8%]	141 [35.8%]	1 [0.3%]	52 [13.2%]	51 [13%]	394
4	Political leaders lack transparency in their decision-making processes regarding public resources.	153 [38.8%]	139 [35.3%]	4 [1%]	39 [9.9%]	60 [15.2%]	394
	Total	725 [36.6%]	619 [31.2%]	10 [0.5%]	210 [10.6%]	213 [10.8%]	1475

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Calculate the percentage of each score in each cell and put it in bracket inside the cell including total and percentage down, total and percentage right:

Research Question two: What role does the media play in holding politicians accountable in Southeast Nigeria?

Table 5: Role of Media in Accountability

S/N	Item Description	SA	A	UN	D	SD	Total
1	The media regularly exposes unethical practices by political leaders.	171 (43.4%)	123 (31.2%)	2 (0.5%)	36 (9.1%)	62 (15.7%)	394
2	Investigative journalism plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of political leaders.	153 (38.8%)	146 (37.1%)	1 (0.3%)	61 (15.5%)	33 (8.4%)	394
3	Media coverage effectively highlights moral shortcomings or corruption within government.	165 (41.9%)	147 (37.3%)	2 (0.5%)	53 (13.5%)	27 (6.9%)	394
4	Media coverage raises public awareness of political leaders' ethical behavior and accountability.	143 (36.3%)	147 (37.3%)	4 (1%)	34 (8.6%)	66 (16.8%)	394
	Total	732 (37.1%)	663 (33.7%)	9 (0.5%)	184 (9.3%)	188 (9.6%)	1475

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Findings

The results of the chi-square tests offer valuable insights into the relationship between the moral conduct of political leaders, the role of the media in ensuring political accountability, and the influence of external factors on the media's effectiveness in Southeast Nigeria. Each hypothesis tested contributed to a greater understanding of these dynamics. The rejection of the null hypothesis one indicated a significant relationship between the moral shortcomings of political leaders and the level of public trust in governance. The chi-square statistic (29.25) was greater than the critical value (21.03), and the p-value (0.0036) was below the 0.05 significance level, confirming that moral failings of politicians significantly erode public trust. This result is consistent with previous research, which suggests that corruption within political leadership undermines national development by eroding institutional trust and public confidence (Okibe & Onyekachi, 2020). Public trust is central to democratic governance, and political leaders' ethical conduct plays a crucial role in shaping this trust (Nguvese, 2014).

The rejection of the null hypothesis two also suggested that political interference and economic pressures significantly affect the media's effectiveness in holding politicians accountable. The chi-square statistic (28.10) exceeded the critical value (21.03), and the p-value (0.008) was significantly below 0.05, confirming that external factors such as political and economic pressures shape the media's role in political accountability. The findings align with previous literature, which highlighted how media organizations are often influenced by political and economic forces (Foster, 2019). For instance, Adebayo and Okunade (2022) explored the role of anti-corruption campaigns in Nigeria, emphasizing the media's critical role in raising awareness and fostering accountability. Their study emphasized the media's influence in combating corruption, similar to the findings of this research regarding the need for a robust media approach. Similarly, Nwachukwu and Nwogwugwu (2021) investigated the relationship between corruption and infrastructure development, revealing how pervasive corruption in government agencies hampers infrastructural growth. Their findings resonate with the conclusions of this study on the detrimental effects of corruption on national development. Political interference and financial pressures may limit the media's ability to operate independently and may lead to biased reporting, further diminishing the media's watchdog function. This result underscores the need to address these challenges to ensure the media's effectiveness in promoting accountability and transparency.

5. CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that the moral conduct of political leaders is a key determinant of public trust in governance. The study also highlighted the significant role of the media in promoting political accountability. However, the media's ability to perform its watchdog function is often compromised by political and economic pressures. The study's findings emphasize the need for ethical leadership, a free press, and reforms to address external challenges to media independence. The study reinforces the argument that the moral integrity of political leaders and the independence of the media are foundational to effective governance and democratic accountability in Southeast Nigeria. Therefore, enhancing both the ethical standards of politicians and the autonomy of media institutions is crucial for fostering a transparent and accountable political environment.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Political leaders must prioritize ethical behaviour and transparency to restore public trust. Implementing strong ethical standards and accountability mechanisms will foster public confidence in governance.

2. Efforts should be made to ensure that the media remains free from external pressures, including political and financial influences. This includes ensuring that media outlets are not dependent on government advertising or private financial interests that could shape their reporting.

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