

Research Article

Media, Politics, and Truth: Investigating the Role of Journalism in Democratic Accountability

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Abstract

Journalism has historically been regarded as one of the principal institutions through which democratic societies hold political power accountable. As the collector and disseminator of information about the conduct of governments, elected representatives, and public institutions, the press performs a mediating function between the state and the citizenry, enabling informed political participation and oversight. This paper investigates the role of journalism in sustaining democratic accountability, situating the discussion within the broader triad of media, politics, and truth. It examines the theoretical foundations of the press as a "fourth estate" and as a constitutive element of the public sphere, before analysing the specific mechanisms through which journalism performs accountability functions: agenda-setting, investigative reporting, watchdog surveillance of the powerful, and the facilitation of public deliberation. The paper further examines the structural and technological pressures that are reshaping this role, including commercial ownership concentration, the erosion of traditional revenue models, the proliferation of misinformation on digital and social media platforms, and rising political polarization, all of which complicate journalism's claim to convey "truth" to the public. Drawing on secondary literature in political communication and democratic theory, the paper argues that while the normative importance of journalism to democratic accountability remains undiminished, the practical capacity of the press to perform this function is increasingly contingent, uneven, and contested. The paper concludes by outlining institutional and policy measures — including media literacy initiatives, transparent ownership regulation, and support for public-interest journalism — that may help restore journalism's accountability function in an increasingly fragmented media environment.

Keywords: *Journalism; Democratic Accountability; Media and Politics; Public Sphere; Misinformation; Watchdog Journalism; Political Communication.*

1. Introduction

Democratic governance rests on the premise that those who exercise public power can be held answerable for their decisions and conduct. Elections provide the periodic mechanism of accountability, but between elections, it is largely the media — and journalism in particular — that sustains the flow of information necessary for citizens, civil society organisations, and institutional actors to monitor those in power. The press has long been described as the "fourth estate," a term that captures its presumed institutional role in checking executive, legislative, and judicial authority through publicity, scrutiny, and the disclosure of information that power holders might prefer to keep concealed.

The relationship between media, politics, and truth is, however, neither simple nor static. Journalism does not merely mirror political reality; it selects, frames, and interprets events, and in doing so it shapes public understanding of what counts as a political problem, who is responsible for it, and what solutions are legitimate. This constructive role gives journalism considerable influence over democratic accountability, but it also renders the profession vulnerable to commercial pressure, political capture, and, increasingly, to competition from unregulated digital information ecosystems in which the boundary between journalism and other forms of content production has become blurred. This paper investigates how journalism performs its accountability function, the conditions under which this function is strengthened or weakened, and the implications of these dynamics for democratic governance.

2. Review of Literature

The theoretical starting point for most scholarship on journalism and democracy is the concept of the public sphere, understood as the discursive space in which private citizens come together to deliberate on matters of common concern, with the media serving as the principal infrastructure of this space in mass societies. Scholars working in this tradition have argued that the commercialisation of the press progressively narrows the public sphere, replacing rational-critical debate with entertainment-oriented and opinion-driven content.

A parallel strand of literature addresses the press's watchdog function, examining how investigative and adversarial journalism exposes corruption, malfeasance, and abuse of office. This literature typically distinguishes between the normative expectation that journalism monitors power and the empirical constraints — commercial, legal, and political — that limit the exercise of this function in practice. Comparative media systems research has further shown that the strength of journalism's accountability role varies considerably across countries depending on press freedom protections, media ownership structures, and the degree of political parallelism between media outlets and party systems.

More recent scholarship has turned to the disruption of journalism's traditional role by digital platforms and social media. This body of work highlights the decline of advertising-funded journalism, the rise of algorithmically curated news feeds, and the spread of misinformation and disinformation, all of which have been argued to weaken the capacity of professional journalism to serve as a shared, trusted source of political information. Taken together, this literature suggests that journalism's accountability function is neither automatic nor guaranteed by the mere existence of a free press; it is contingent on institutional, economic, and technological conditions that are themselves undergoing significant change.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the theoretical basis of journalism's role in democratic accountability.
2. To analyse the principal mechanisms — watchdog reporting, agenda-setting, and facilitation of public deliberation — through which journalism holds political power accountable.
3. To identify the structural and technological challenges confronting journalism's accountability function in the contemporary media environment.
4. To suggest institutional and policy measures for strengthening public-interest journalism.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and analytical research design, drawing on secondary sources — peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and institutional reports in the fields of political communication, media studies, and democratic theory. The paper follows an interpretive approach, synthesising existing theoretical and empirical literature to construct a coherent account of journalism's accountability function and the pressures acting upon it. As a

conceptual and literature-based study, it does not involve primary data collection; its contribution lies in the systematic organisation and analysis of existing scholarship around a specific research question.

5. Journalism and Democratic Accountability: A Conceptual Framework

Democratic accountability can be understood as comprising two related dimensions: answerability, the obligation of power holders to provide information and justification for their actions, and enforceability, the capacity of citizens or institutions to sanction power holders for misconduct. Journalism contributes primarily to the first dimension. By investigating, reporting, and publicising the conduct of government, journalism generates the information on which answerability depends; it rarely possesses direct enforcement power itself, but the information it produces feeds into other accountability mechanisms — elections, judicial proceedings, legislative oversight, and public protest — that do carry enforcement capacity. Journalism therefore functions as an accountability-enabling institution rather than an accountability-enforcing one, a distinction that is important for realistically assessing what the press can and cannot achieve.

6. The Role of Journalism in Ensuring Accountability

6.1 The Watchdog Function

The watchdog function refers to journalism's role in monitoring the exercise of power and exposing wrongdoing, corruption, and abuse of office. Investigative journalism, in particular, has historically been credited with bringing about the resignation of officials, the reversal of policies, and the initiation of judicial and legislative inquiries following the publication of evidence of misconduct. The watchdog function depends heavily on the independence of the press from the very actors it investigates, which makes ownership structure, editorial autonomy, and legal protections for sources and whistle-blowers central to its effectiveness.

6.2 Agenda-Setting and Framing

Beyond exposing specific instances of wrongdoing, journalism shapes democratic accountability more broadly through agenda-setting — determining which issues receive public attention — and framing, which shapes how those issues are understood and who is held responsible for them. A government's performance on an issue that never receives sustained media coverage is effectively insulated from the informal accountability that publicity generates, regardless of its formal status as a matter of public concern.

6.3 Facilitating the Public Sphere

Journalism also performs an accountability function indirectly, by supplying the shared factual basis on which public deliberation depends. A functioning public sphere requires that citizens have access to a reasonably common set of facts about political events, even where they interpret those facts differently. Political journalism, at its best, provides this common informational ground, enabling debate to proceed on the basis of shared premises rather than mutually exclusive realities.

6.4 Electoral Accountability

Finally, journalism informs the electoral mechanism of accountability directly, through election coverage, policy analysis, and fact-checking of political claims. The quality of electoral accountability is therefore partly dependent on the quality of pre-election journalism: voters who are poorly informed about the record and platforms of competing candidates are less able to use their vote as an instrument of accountability, irrespective of the formal freedom and fairness of the electoral process itself.

7. Challenges to Journalism's Accountability Role

7.1 Ownership Concentration and Commercial Pressure

The concentration of media ownership in the hands of a small number of corporate or politically aligned actors raises concerns about editorial independence, particularly where media houses have commercial or political interests that intersect with the subjects of their coverage. Commercial pressure to maximise audience share can also incentivise sensationalism and entertainment-oriented content over sustained investigative work, which is comparatively costly and slow to produce.

7.2 Disruption of Revenue Models

The migration of advertising revenue to digital platforms has undermined the traditional financing model of professional journalism, leading to newsroom contraction, the closure of local and regional outlets, and a decline in the resources available for investigative and accountability journalism specifically, which is typically more expensive to produce than routine event-based reporting.

7.3 Misinformation and the Fragmentation of Truth

The proliferation of user-generated content, algorithmically curated newsfeeds, and coordinated disinformation campaigns has complicated journalism's traditional claim to serve as an authoritative source of political information. Citizens today encounter political information from a much wider and less regulated range of sources, many of which do not adhere to professional journalistic norms of verification, and this fragmentation weakens the shared factual basis that public deliberation, and accountability, depend upon.

7.4 Political Polarization and Declining Trust

In many democracies, public trust in journalism has become increasingly polarised along partisan lines, with citizens more inclined to trust media outlets aligned with their own political views and to dismiss critical coverage of preferred leaders as biased. This dynamic weakens the disciplining effect of adverse coverage, since political leaders can appeal to sympathetic segments of the media environment to offset scrutiny published elsewhere.

8. Discussion and Findings

The analysis suggests that journalism's contribution to democratic accountability operates through several distinct but interlocking mechanisms — watchdog investigation, agenda-setting, provision of a shared public sphere, and support for electoral accountability — each of which is currently under strain from a combination of economic, technological, and political pressures. The cumulative effect of these pressures is not the disappearance of journalism's accountability function, but its increasing unevenness: well-resourced national and international outlets continue to produce significant investigative and accountability journalism, while local and regional accountability journalism has contracted considerably in many contexts, leaving gaps in the oversight of sub-national and municipal governance where much day-to-day public administration actually occurs. The study further finds that the erosion of a shared informational public sphere, driven by the fragmentation of media consumption and the spread of misinformation, poses a more fundamental challenge to democratic accountability than any single instance of media bias or ownership concentration, because it undermines the very possibility of a common basis for public judgement.

9. Conclusion

Journalism remains normatively central to democratic accountability, functioning as the principal institution through which citizens obtain the information necessary to monitor and judge those who exercise political power. However, the practical capacity of journalism to perform this function is neither automatic nor uniformly distributed; it depends on institutional independence, adequate financing, professional standards of verification, and a media environment in which credible reporting can reach and be trusted by a broad public. Strengthening journalism's accountability role in the present era requires deliberate institutional attention: measures such as transparent regulation of media ownership, public and

philanthropic support for public-interest and local journalism, legal protection for investigative reporters and whistle-blowers, and sustained investment in media literacy to help citizens evaluate the credibility of competing information sources. Without such measures, the gap between journalism's normative promise and its practical performance is likely to widen, with corresponding costs for the quality of democratic governance.

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Citation: Dr. Parthesha K V. 2026. "Media, Politics, and Truth: Investigating the Role of Journalism in Democratic Accountability". *International Journal of Academic Research*, 13(3): 92-96.

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