

Broadcast Journalism: The World's Town Crier; Nigeria's Gong: A Sonic Democracy and Electronic Fourth Estate (1932-2025 And Beyond)

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ABSTRACT

Broadcast journalism in Nigeria and worldwide is rooted in the history of the people and their land. Long before modern media, the Alago Oba as it was called in Yorubaland, or the Ogene or Ikoro drummer in Igboland, and the Mai-Shela with his Kakaki trumpet in Hausa-Fulani regions functioned as the original broadcasters. In present-day Nigeria, this very important role is now reflected in the work of radio, television, satellites, smartphones, and digital/AI voices. This evolution, from the early-morning gong to today's live streams and algorithm-informed news, shows the persistence and importance of the crier's mission. (Folayan et al., 2021). Drawing on the African Trado-Modern Communication Model, this shows that broadcast journalism keeps its main democratic role as the electronic Fourth Estate, even as it adapts to changes in the 21st century (Hampton, 2009; Akpan, 2023). This analysis explores regional variations in the role of traditional criers, the evolution of Nigerian broadcasting from the colonial era to post-independence, the emergence of citizen journalism during #EndSARS and the 2023 elections, the ongoing prevalence of the "brown envelope" culture, the impact of media ownership, and the persistent digital divide that continues to isolate millions in so-called "silent villages." Recent data from 2025–2026 indicate that while national internet penetration ranges from 45% to 65%, rural access remains significantly lower at only 23% in many communities (Umeh, 2025). This paper argues that professional journalists have shifted from being the sole sources of news to becoming important "curators of authenticity" amid widespread misinformation and platform-driven media. In 2024, Nigeria's entertainment and media sector grew by 11.2%, the fastest rate in Africa, thanks to streaming, social video, and podcasts (Onwuamaeze, 2025). Even so, people tend to trust verified broadcast sources during uncertain times. The article ends with policy suggestions on subsidies, journalist welfare, AI ethics, and community media licensing. No matter if the gong is metal, satellite-linked, or digital, its purpose remains the same: to inform, educate, unify, and hold those in power accountable through reliable, accessible, and culturally relevant communication.

Keywords: Broadcast journalism, town crier, fourth estate, citizen journalism, digital divide.

INTRODUCTION

The Town Crier in the Nigerian Landscape

Surprisingly, in many rural parts of Nigeria, you can still hear the gong early in the morning. In the 1840's, long before the printing press arrived Nigeria and before the first radio broadcast aired from Lagos in 1932, the town crier was the main way people shared news. Across more than 250 ethnic groups in the country, the town crier had different names and was much more than just a messenger. In Yorubaland, the Alago Oba was usually a respected elder chosen for his strong voice and good character, and he would recite the Oba's Oriki, or praise poetry, before announcing decrees. I have witnessed this couple of times whenever I visited the palace of the Ewi of Ado-Ekiti during special occasions. In Igboland, the Ogene player used the Ikoro wooden drum to send messages in the community square; this signals an urgent beat that meant there was an emergency, while a steady familiar rhythm would call the people to a meeting. In the North as well, the Mai-Shela would play the long

Kakaki trumpet, whose sound would ring across the walls of the community, linking the palace with everyday people (Ottah, 2016; Apata, 2016; Dike, 2013).

This was more than just an announcement; it was a form of communication that involved everyone. The crier walked through the community, called people to gather, and allowed for immediate responses like questions, clarifications, or even disagreement. People did not need to read or write because the message was spoken, rhythmic, and deeply connected to their culture. According to Morgan et al. (2021), "Trado-modern communication strategies," the town crier also helped with community development by organizing work for roads or farms, sharing public health information, giving security alerts, and helping people reach agreement. The news always came from trusted leaders such as the Oba, Council of Elders, or other traditional rulers, which made it credible. If the crier ever lied, the whole community would lose trust. Scholars describe this as "high-fidelity" communication: it was immediate, useful, and always relevant to local needs (Nwammuo et al., 2015).

In the contemporary digital domain, notable parallels with the traditional town crier persist, albeit in transformed ways. A news anchor in a Lagos studio or an AI-generated voice delivering headlines on a smartphone now fulfils a similar function, with the "village square" expanded to an international audience. The beat of the gong has evolved into the alert tone, live protest streams, or the 9:00 p.m. network bulletin that once unified the nation under NTA. Despite these technological shifts, the core mission remains: to inform, mobilise, educate, and unify. As Nigeria faces rapid urbanisation, a growing youth population, and technological disruption, broadcast journalism continues to serve as the modern town crier sometimes amplified by satellite, sometimes challenged by citizen-generated content, but consistently expected to provide truthful information amid mounting noise. (Chouliarakis, 2025).

Recent data by the NCC highlighting the urgency in providing internet access stood between 45.5% and 65% nationally, but in many rural areas, it is only 23% (NCC, 2025; Vanguard, 2025). Urban areas have 57–85% access, while rural communities still depend on radios and town criers. This gap is not just about technology, it also involves culture, language, and economics.

This article argues that, in the digital age, for broadcast journalism to thrive as Nigeria's electronic Fourth Estate—the press and news media considered an independent societal force that monitors power and informs the public—it should maintain the town crier's tradition of trust, closeness, and community. The discussion combines historical context with current analysis, drawing on both Nigerian traditions and global ideas. It explores how blending traditional oral methods with modern digital tools is shaping Nigerian broadcasting in recent times.

Conceptual Model: Agenda-Setting, Media Dependency, and Trado-Modernism

To understand why the town crier metaphor remains powerful, it helps to look at established communication theories in the African context. McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda-Setting Theory says that media do not tell people what to think, but what to think about. The traditional crier did this by choosing which royal decree to announce each morning, shaping what mattered most to the community. Today, when a broadcast station highlights issues such as climate change, fuel subsidy removal, or electoral violence, it plays a similar role in setting the national or even global agenda.

Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, cited in Nsereke et al., 2013) adds another perspective. During crises like the 2020 #EndSARS protests, the 2023 election problems, or the 2024–2025 inflation spikes, people rely heavily on the media for information and support. In Nigeria's mix of tradition and modernity, this dependence is mixed: urban youth use X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok, while rural residents wait for the local gong-man or community radio to confirm news. This layered dependence shows why, even in 2026, people still turn to traditional broadcast outlets to check the facts when social media "breaking news" is uncertain (Anyanwu et al., 2024).

The Trado-Modern Communication Model developed by African scholars like Des Wilson and Frank Ugboajah and supported by Morgan et al. (2021), is especially useful for understanding Nigeria. This model suggests that modern media are most effective when they include traditional symbols, languages, and ways of involving people. Stations such as Wazobia FM (which uses Pidgin English) or Bond FM (which broadcasts in Yoruba)

are more than just digital media. They act as modern “gong-men,” swapping metal gongs for microphones but keeping the cultural rhythm, language, and trust. Pidgin becomes the new Oriki, and local proverbs take the place of the old rhythmic beats.

On a global level, this connects to the idea of the Fourth Estate. Thomas Carlyle (2008) called reporters in the gallery “a Fourth Estate more important far than they all,” able to speak to the whole nation. Broadcast technology made this even more powerful by allowing real-time communication and visual closeness (McQuail, 2009). In Nigeria, though, the Fourth Estate faces special challenges: state ownership from the past, political control of private stations (like TVC, which is linked to political figures), and the “brown envelope” economy. Because of this, the framework needs a mixed approach that respects the crier’s participatory roots and also protects professional fact-checking in a chaotic media environment.

Historical Advancement: From the Gong to the Satellite (1932–2025)

The shift from the physical gong to digital streaming reflects a history shaped by colonial rule, nationalist movements, government control, deregulation, and rapColonial Foundations (1932 to 1950s): The Radio Distribution Service (RDS) started with wired boxes that played BBC programs for colonial officers and a few 'civilised' locals. According to Olatunji’s 2018 paper, operators soon used a strong, rhythmic 'crier style' to connect with listeners who were used to oral traditions (Olatunji, 2018).on (Olatunji, 2018).

Nationalist Awakening: Leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe ('Zik') and Obafemi Awolowo saw the influence of broadcast media. Azikiwe’s West African Pilot used direct, popular language similar to a town crier. In 1959, Awolowo started Western Nigeria Television (WNTV) in Ibadan, the first TV station in Africa. The motto 'First in Africa' was both a political and technological statement. After being denied radio time by the colonial governor, Awolowo created his own way to reach the people (Fasan, 2018).

Post-Independence Centralisation (1960 to 1992): The Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) and later the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) became the main national broadcasters. The 9:00 p.m. news became a daily ritual, with people across the country tuning in. Journalism often supported government policies and sometimes became propaganda during the civil war.

Deregulation and Growth (1992 to Present): Decree 38 of 1992 ended the broadcasting monopoly. RayPower FM and Africa Independent Television (AIT) brought competition, commercial opportunities, and more variety. By the early 2000s, many private stations had appeared. The rise of digital platforms, DTT, and smartphones made it possible for anyone to share news.

Certain key events show how things have changed but also stayed the same. During #EndSARS in 2020, people shared videos on Twitter and Instagram, moving faster than traditional media. Oghogho & Osazuwa (2024) explain that broadcasters only responded after citizen reporting led the way (Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024; Kperogi, 2016). In the 2023 elections, when INEC’s IReV portal had 'technical errors,' citizens quickly uploaded polling results on WhatsApp and Instagram. While official sources were silent, ordinary people filled the gap. By 2025 to 2026, PwC reports that Nigeria’s entertainment and media sector grew by 11.2%, the fastest in Africa, thanks to streaming and social video. Still, radio remains the main source in rural areas (PwC, 2025).

Layman’s Perspective vs. Journalist’s Perspective

People see the town crier in different ways, depending on their perspective.

The Layman’s Lens: For most Nigerians, especially those in rural areas, journalism is valued for its usefulness and how close it feels to daily life. News about market prices, fertilizer deliveries, or local security is more important than national politics. Many people still rely on 'street talk,' WhatsApp messages from family, or the familiar voice of a broadcaster in Lagos (Otiono, 2011; Morgan et al., 2021). When they have doubts, they turn to radio or TV for confirmation. Recent data shows that Nigeria leads the world in using social media for news at 56.6%, but traditional broadcast is still seen as the most trustworthy source (Reuters Institute, 2025).

The Professional's Burden: Trained journalists see themselves as watchdogs who follow ethical rules, ask the right questions, and check facts carefully (Akinfemisoye, 2013; Ekpu et al., 2023). They feel overwhelmed by how quickly citizens share news and by the pressure to get more clicks and views. The 'brown envelope' culture, where journalists receive cash for positive coverage, is still a difficult problem. Adegbola et al. (2025), in their article "When public relations ethics clash with reality: How PR professionals negotiate 'brown envelope' practices," say this happens because of low pay, unpaid salaries, and pressure from media owners (Adegbola et al., 2025; Nwodu et al., 2025). Journalists in Anambra State, for example, say that refusing these payments can put their jobs at risk. The problem gets worse when media outlets are owned by politicians, who often use them for personal gain instead of serving the public.

Citizen Journalism: The Networked Town Crier

Smartphones have made it possible for almost anyone in Nigeria to share news and stories. Platforms like X, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp now allow information to spread quickly and widely, breaking the old hold of traditional media. The #EndSARS protests in 2020 showed this clearly: people streamed police brutality live, reaching global audiences before mainstream news could react. This changed political conversations and pushed for more accountability (Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024; Rasheed, 2024). In the 2023 elections, when official results were slow to appear, citizens posted videos from polling stations, helping to verify what was happening.

But there are also risks. Without proper checks, false information, rumors, and even violence can spread easily. The Twitter ban from 2021 to 2022 showed how dependent people are on foreign-owned platforms. Influencers like VeryDarkMan and Reno Omokri now have audiences as large as TV stations. They act like modern town criers, trusted by many but without the same accountability. In response, professional broadcasters have begun acting as curators, vetting citizen content and adding important context (Anyanwu et al., 2024; Okoro et al., 2013).

Information Flow, Consumer Reach, and the Stubborn Digital Divide

Nigeria's information landscape mixes old and new ways of sharing news. In rural areas, people often depend on town criers and portable radios. Young people in cities usually get their news from platforms like TikTok and X. According to DataReportal's 2026 report, "Digital 2026: Nigeria," many people now feel "news fatigue" because of too many notifications and forwarded messages, especially on WhatsApp. When people are unsure about what is true, they often turn to radio or television for reliable updates.

The digital divide in Nigeria is clear. In 2025–2026, about 45.5–65% of people nationwide have internet access, but only 23% in rural areas do, compared to 57% in cities (DataReportal, 2026; NCC, 2025; Vanguard, 2025). Broadband access is around 48–53% (Okonji, 2025). High data costs, unreliable electricity, and the dominance of English make it feel like there are two Nigerias: one online and one offline. Indigenous-language stations like Bond FM and Wazobia FM help connect people but often struggle to attract advertisers. Some of the most effective campaigns, like those from the National Orientation Agency, use a mix of town criers, radio, social media, and influencers to reach as many people as possible (Nsereke et al., 2013).

Digital Disruption, Algorithmic Curation, and the Future Gong

Profit-driven digital platforms have shifted media content toward more subjective and emotional stories. As engagement and algorithms shape decisions, media outlets often focus on participation and speed instead of deep analysis (Greene et al., 2023). Automated news presenters can now create stories and quickly translate them into local languages, serving as virtual town criers who never tire. This technology keeps people informed at all hours, but it can also lead to fragmented information and a weaker shared sense of reality.

Still, the human voice remains important during times of crisis. In situations like communal clashes or insurgencies, people look for empathy that algorithms cannot offer. Broadcast journalism can survive by combining its strengths: trusted verification, public-interest rules, and ways for people to take part. Nigeria's growing media industry (PwC, 2025) brings new opportunities, but only if key values like accuracy, speed, and accessibility are protected.

Policy Recommendations: Securing the Gong for Generations

To ensure the town crier's beat remains strong:

1. Local Gong Subsidy: NBC should offer tax incentives and funding for indigenous-language and community stations.
2. Digital Divide Trust Fund: Channel telecom levies into low-cost data and rural towers.
3. Journalist Welfare Reform: Enforce minimum wages; revoke licences for chronic non-payment to eliminate brown envelopes.
4. AI-Ethical Guidelines: Require clear labelling to let audiences know when content is influenced or curated by algorithms.
5. Simplified Community Licences: Improve processes so every village can have its own local station.

These measures would preserve the legacy of the town crier while equipping broadcast journalism to meet the challenges of 2030 and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The gong as a medium has changed over time, moving from metal to satellite and now to algorithms, but its main purpose is still the same: to inform, educate, bring people together, and keep governments in check. In 2026, whether it's a village chief using the gong at dawn or a news anchor sharing verified livestreams with citizen reports, broadcast journalism should stand out as a trusted source in a noisy digital world and this to both the gong and crier (the medium and the messenger). By combining new technology with trust, local relevance, strong ethics, and community involvement, broadcast journalism can keep its important role as the world's electronic Fourth Estate. The ongoing challenge is to make sure people keep listening to the truth.

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