



EVALUATING THE BANE OF BROWN ENVELOPE AND YELLOW JOURNALISM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article evaluates the twin ethical problems of **brown envelope journalism** and **yellow journalism** in Nigeria, arguing that both practices undermine the democratic, developmental, and accountability functions of the press. Brown envelope journalism refers to the acceptance, solicitation, or expectation of money, gifts, patronage, or other inducements by journalists in exchange for favourable publication, suppression of information, or distorted coverage. Yellow journalism, by contrast, refers to sensational, exaggerated, misleading, or emotionally manipulative reporting designed to attract attention rather than serve truth. Although the two concepts are analytically distinct, they frequently reinforce each other in Nigeria's media environment, where poor remuneration, weak media business models, ownership pressure, political patronage, regulatory weakness, digital competition, and broader social corruption can distort professional judgement. Drawing on Nigerian journalism ethics codes, recent scholarly literature, and contemporary press-freedom evidence, the article finds that brown envelope practices compromise editorial independence, while yellow journalism corrodes accuracy, fairness, public trust, and national cohesion. It concludes that reform must combine improved welfare for journalists, enforceable self-regulation, newsroom transparency, media literacy, ethical digital publishing standards, and stronger protection for independent journalism.

Keywords: brown envelope journalism, yellow journalism, Nigerian media, media ethics, sensationalism, press freedom, public trust.

Introduction

The Nigerian press has historically played an important role in anti-colonial mobilisation, democratic contestation, public accountability, and civic education. Yet the same press operates within a difficult environment marked by political pressure, insecure employment, ownership influence, economic fragility, and growing digital competition. Reporters Without Borders ranks Nigeria **112th of 180 countries** in the 2026 World Press Freedom Index and describes it as one of West Africa's most dangerous and difficult countries for journalists, noting monitoring, attacks, arbitrary arrests, legal obstruction, and weak state protection mechanisms (Reporters Without Borders, 2026:n.p.)[7]. This context does not excuse unethical journalism, but it helps explain why professional ideals are frequently tested by economic survival, political patronage, and audience-driven sensationalism.

The two ethical disorders examined in this article are **brown envelope journalism** and **yellow journalism**. Brown envelope journalism concerns inducement: the news source, public relations actor, politician, corporate body, religious organisation, or private citizen offers or is expected to offer material benefit to influence the journalist's treatment of information. Yellow journalism concerns distortion: the journalist, editor, platform, or media organisation exaggerates, sensationalises, misleads, or publishes insufficiently verified material to attract readership, viewership, clicks, political advantage, or commercial revenue. In both cases, the injury is public. The audience receives journalism that may look like news but is contaminated either by hidden payment or by sensational manipulation.

This article evaluates these practices as a **bane** of Nigerian journalism because they erode the core public-interest values on which journalism depends. Nigerian professional codes define truth, public trust, editorial independence, accuracy, fairness, and social responsibility as foundational obligations. The Nigerian Code of Ethics for Journalists states that journalism entails "a high degree of public trust," that truth is the cornerstone of journalism, and that journalists should neither solicit nor accept bribes, gratification, or patronage to publish or suppress information (Accountable Journalism, 1998:n.p.)[6]. Brown envelope journalism and yellow journalism therefore represent not minor procedural lapses but deep ethical contradictions that weaken the press as a democratic institution.

Conceptual Clarification

Brown envelope journalism and yellow journalism should not be collapsed into one concept, even though they are often connected in practice. Brown envelope journalism is primarily a problem of **corrupt influence over news judgement**. Salihu defines it broadly as gifts or gratification received for performing journalistic duties and notes that, once accepted, such inducement can influence the reporter's judgement and distort the definition of news (Salihu, 2018:66)[5]. The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada's research on Nigeria similarly describes brown envelope journalism as the giving, expecting, or demanding of cash after press conferences, interviews, and media events, often disguised as transport fare, fuel money, or appreciation (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2017:n.p.)[2].

Yellow journalism is primarily a problem of **sensational or misleading presentation of information**. Encyclopaedia Britannica defines yellow journalism as sensational and exaggerated news coverage

designed to attract readers, tracing its historical origin to the circulation rivalry between the *New York World* and the *New York Journal* in the 1890s and noting its contemporary legacy in clickbait and fake news (Britannica, 2026:n.p.)[4]. In the Nigerian digital setting, Guanah's study of media stakeholders in Delta State found that social media platforms influence the propagation of yellow journalism and fake news, partly because many citizen-journalism actors are not trained in professional ethics (Guanah, 2024:67)[3].

Concept	Core meaning	Typical mechanism	Ethical injury	Nigerian manifestation
Brown envelope journalism	Hidden material inducement that influences coverage	Cash, transport allowance, gifts, sponsored trips, patronage, payroll relationships	Loss of editorial independence, objectivity, fairness, and trust	Payment to publish favourable stories, suppress damaging stories, alter headlines, or grant unearned prominence
Yellow journalism	Sensational, exaggerated, misleading, or poorly verified reporting	Lurid headlines, rumours, clickbait, emotional framing, fake news, partisan propaganda	Loss of accuracy, balance, proportion, decency, and public confidence	Crime sensationalism, political propaganda, social-media rumours, ethnic or religious alarmism, celebrity scandal amplification
Point of convergence	Both corrupt the truth function of journalism	Financial, political, cultural, or audience pressure	Public misinformed or manipulated	Paid sensationalism, advertorials disguised as news, partisan smear campaigns, and click-driven misinformation

The difference matters because remedies must target both the supply of corrupt inducement and the demand for sensational content. A newsroom may reject brown envelopes yet still practise yellow journalism for traffic. Conversely, a journalist may accept brown envelopes and produce seemingly

sober but strategically biased news. The broader ethical task is therefore to rebuild journalism around transparency, verification, independence, and public service.

Theoretical Framework: Social Responsibility and Media Transparency

This article is anchored in **social responsibility theory**, which holds that press freedom carries obligations to truth, balance, fairness, and service to the public. Salihu uses this theory to argue that the press should maintain high professional standards and that media ownership should be understood as stewardship rather than an unlimited private franchise (Salihu, 2018:68)[5]. Social responsibility theory is especially useful in Nigeria because it rejects both state control of the press and irresponsible libertarian excess. It demands freedom from censorship, but it also demands freedom from bribery, rumour, manipulation, and deliberate public deception.

A second useful concept is **media non-transparency**. Adegbola, Aromona, and Elega situate brown envelope journalism within non-transparent media practices, describing it as the exchange of cash gifts for positive coverage and as a challenge to journalistic objectivity (Adegbola et al., 2025:n.p.)(1]. Their study of Nigerian public relations professionals finds that practitioners interpret brown envelope practices through economic, socio-cultural, and ethical lenses, and that both journalists and public relations actors may initiate or sustain non-transparent practices (Adegbola et al., 2025:n.p.)(1]. This framework highlights the fact that brown envelope journalism is not only an individual reporter's failure; it is also a relational and institutional practice embedded in the interaction between newsrooms, sources, advertisers, and political actors.

A journalist should neither solicit nor accept bribes, gratifications or patronage to suppress or publish information.
— **Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists**, Article 7, "Reward and Gratification" (Accountable Journalism, 1998:n.p.)(6]

The quoted ethical rule directly condemns brown envelope journalism. At the same time, the Code's provisions on accuracy, fairness, decency, public interest, and social responsibility condemn the logic of yellow journalism. The ethical foundation is therefore already present; the major challenge is implementation.

Causes of Brown Envelope Journalism in Nigeria

The most frequently cited cause of brown envelope journalism in Nigeria is poor remuneration. Salihu identifies poor salary as the dominant reason many journalists accept brown envelopes, while also insisting that poor pay cannot morally justify the acceptance of inducements to suppress important facts or distort information (Salihu, 2018:66). The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada's source review similarly reports that brown envelope practices are associated with poor and delayed payment of journalists, and that some brown envelopes may exceed several months of a reporter's salary (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2017:n.p.)(2].

Yet remuneration is not the only cause. Some sources observe that even relatively well-paid journalists may accept inducements, which suggests that brown envelope journalism is sustained by professional

culture, opportunity, weak enforcement, and broader corruption (Salihu, 2018:67)[5]. The practice is sometimes normalised as “transport money,” “kola,” “PR,” or appreciation, making it socially ambiguous even when ethically dangerous. Such euphemisms reduce moral resistance by presenting inducement as hospitality rather than influence.

Another cause is the weakness of professional enforcement. The Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists prohibits gratification, but the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada notes that enforcement is weak and that the code is often treated as professional guidance rather than a strong legal or institutional sanctioning mechanism (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2017:n.p.)[2]. This creates a gap between formal ethical commitment and newsroom practice. When violations produce little reputational or institutional cost, unethical habits become routinised.

Ownership and political patronage also contribute. RSF notes that balanced political coverage in Nigeria can be difficult depending on the media outlet’s owner and that governmental interference may involve pressure, harassment, censorship, and arbitrary decisions (Reporters Without Borders, 2026:n.p.)[7]. In such an environment, brown envelope journalism does not only occur between a reporter and a source; it may also occur structurally through owner-interest journalism, political sponsorship, disguised advertorials, and patron-client relationships between media institutions and powerful actors.

Cause	How it operates	Ethical consequence
Poor salaries and delayed payment	Journalists become financially vulnerable and may treat inducements as survival income	Compromised independence and unequal access to coverage
Cultural normalisation of gifts	Cash is disguised as transport fare, appreciation, kola, or hospitality	Bribery becomes socially acceptable and difficult to challenge
Weak enforcement of codes	Ethical rules exist but sanctions are inconsistent or ineffective	Violations become routine and reputational cost declines
Ownership and political pressure	Proprietors, politicians, and advertisers shape editorial priorities	Public-interest news is displaced by patron-interest news
Broader corruption environment	Media practices mirror wider patterns of bribery and patronage	Journalism loses moral authority to hold others accountable

Causes of Yellow Journalism in Nigeria

Yellow journalism in Nigeria is driven by a mixture of commercial competition, political propaganda, weak verification culture, digital acceleration, and audience psychology. Britannica's general account of yellow journalism shows that sensationalism historically emerged from intense competition for readers and circulation (Britannica, 2026:n.p.)[4]. In contemporary Nigeria, a similar competition occurs across newspapers, broadcast stations, blogs, social media pages, and digital-native news platforms. The reward structure of online publishing often favours speed, emotion, outrage, and virality over verification and proportion.

The digital dimension is particularly important. Guanah's study in Delta State reports that social media platforms influence the spread of yellow journalism and fake news, and that citizen journalism can worsen the problem when information producers lack professional grooming in journalism ethics (Guanah, 2024:67)[3]. While citizen journalism has democratic value because it broadens participation and can expose neglected issues, it also creates risks when unverified claims are presented as news, when rumours are framed as facts, or when ethnic, religious, and political tensions are exploited for engagement.

Yellow journalism is also encouraged by economic pressure. As advertising revenue fragments and audiences migrate online, some media organisations adopt sensational headlines and emotional framing to attract clicks. This problem is not limited to marginal blogs. Established outlets may also exaggerate headlines, overstate conflict, personalise public issues, or publish incomplete breaking stories in order to remain visible in a crowded media ecosystem. When commercial survival becomes the dominant editorial compass, public-interest journalism is displaced by attention-market journalism.

Finally, yellow journalism thrives where political polarisation is intense. Nigerian public life is often structured around party competition, ethno-regional suspicion, religious sensitivity, and distrust of state institutions. In such settings, sensational framing can mobilise audiences quickly, but it can also inflame fear, prejudice, and violence. The Nigerian Code of Ethics warns journalists to separate facts from conjecture and comment, avoid misleading information, and refrain from presenting violence or vulgarity in ways that glorify such acts (Accountable Journalism, 1998:n.p.)[6]. These rules are direct safeguards against yellow journalism.

Consequences for Nigerian Democracy and Society

The first consequence is the erosion of **public trust**. Journalism depends on the audience's belief that news is gathered and presented in good faith. When citizens suspect that journalists can be bought or that headlines are crafted merely for sensational effect, they become less willing to accept even accurate reports. Salihu observes that brown envelope journalism has cast a shadow on Nigerian media credibility and is linked to manipulation, subjectivity, biased reportage, fakery, sycophancy, and cynicism (Salihu, 2018:69)[5]. This credibility crisis weakens the press's capacity to inform citizens, expose wrongdoing, and provide a shared factual basis for democratic deliberation.

The second consequence is the weakening of **editorial independence**. Brown envelope journalism turns news judgement into a private transaction. Instead of asking whether a story is true, important, balanced, and in the public interest, the compromised journalist asks whether a source has paid, promised access, or can confer advantage. This violates the ethical principle that news-content decisions should be the responsibility of professional journalists (Accountable Journalism,

1998:n.p.)[6]. It also creates inequality in public visibility: wealthy sources can purchase favourable attention, while poor citizens and marginalised communities may remain unheard.

The third consequence is the distortion of **public accountability**. In democratic theory, the press acts as a watchdog over power. Brown envelope journalism turns the watchdog into a client of the powerful; yellow journalism turns the watchdog into a performer of outrage. Both failures help corrupt or incompetent actors escape scrutiny. A damaging story may be buried because a source has paid for silence, or a trivial scandal may dominate public attention because it is more sensational than policy reporting. In either case, citizens are denied the information needed for responsible civic judgement.

The fourth consequence is harm to **national cohesion and security**. Yellow journalism can intensify ethnic, religious, regional, and partisan tensions by exaggerating conflict or circulating insufficiently verified claims. In a diverse country such as Nigeria, careless sensationalism can worsen distrust and trigger real-world harm. The Code of Ethics' requirements on accuracy, fairness, decency, social responsibility, and public interest are therefore not abstract professional ideals; they are safeguards for peaceful coexistence (Accountable Journalism, 1998:n.p.)[6].

The fifth consequence is the degradation of **professional identity**. When brown envelopes become normal and sensationalism becomes profitable, young journalists learn that survival depends less on verification, courage, and public service than on access, patronage, and attention capture. Guanah's findings on citizen journalism and lack of professional ethics further show how digital-era information production can blur the boundary between trained journalism and unregulated content creation (Guanah, 2024:67)[3]. The long-term effect is a profession that struggles to distinguish itself from propaganda, entertainment, public relations, and rumour.

Relationship Between Brown Envelope Journalism and Yellow Journalism

Brown envelope journalism and yellow journalism reinforce each other in at least three ways. First, inducement can finance sensationalism. A politician or interest group may pay journalists, bloggers, or influencers to publish exaggerated claims against opponents. The result is paid propaganda disguised as public-interest news. Second, sensationalism can attract inducement. A journalist known for dramatic headlines or viral reach becomes attractive to sources seeking attention, image laundering, or reputational attack. Third, both practices operate through non-transparency. The public is not told that money changed hands, that a headline exaggerates the evidence, or that a story is designed to manipulate emotion rather than inform judgement.

This convergence explains why anti-corruption reform in journalism must include both financial transparency and editorial quality control. A newsroom that bans brown envelopes but rewards clickbait still undermines public trust. A newsroom that discourages sensationalism but permits undisclosed sponsored content still deceives the audience. Ethical reform must therefore address the full chain of news production: source relations, reporter welfare, editorial supervision, headline writing, fact-checking, corrections, advertising transparency, and audience engagement.

Evaluation of Existing Ethical and Regulatory Responses

Nigeria does not lack formal ethical principles. The Code of Ethics for Nigerian Journalists contains clear standards on editorial independence, accuracy, fairness, reward and gratification, public interest, social responsibility, and press freedom (Accountable Journalism, 1998:n.p.)[6]. The problem lies in

enforcement, institutionalisation, and economic feasibility. Ethical codes cannot succeed if journalists are unpaid, if owners demand partisan coverage, if editors tolerate inducements, if professional bodies rarely sanction violations, and if audiences reward sensationalism with attention.

The existing self-regulatory model has an important advantage: it protects journalism from excessive state control. In a country where press freedom faces legal and security threats, state-led regulation can easily become censorship. RSF's account of Nigeria's legal and safety environment shows that journalists already face pressure through criminal defamation, cybercrime provisions, surveillance, arbitrary detention, and violence (Reporters Without Borders, 2026:n.p.)(7]. Therefore, reform should not be framed as giving government more power over newsrooms. Instead, it should strengthen professional self-regulation, independent ombuds systems, transparent corrections policies, and credible peer accountability.

However, self-regulation must become more credible. A code that is rarely enforced becomes ceremonial. Professional bodies, newsroom managers, journalism schools, and civil society organisations should create mechanisms for investigating complaints, publishing findings, naming violations, and rewarding ethical excellence. This should include protection for journalists who refuse brown envelopes and for editors who resist owner or advertiser interference. Ethical courage must be made professionally sustainable.

Recommendations

The first remedy is improved **journalists' welfare**. Media owners should pay regular and living wages, provide basic reporting resources, and end the practice of sending journalists to assignments without transport or production support. Poor pay does not justify bribery, but it creates vulnerability. Salihu's recommendation for improved welfare remains central because a journalist who cannot survive professionally is easier to compromise (Salihu, 2018:69)(5].

The second remedy is enforceable **newsroom anti-inducement policy**. Every media organisation should adopt a written policy prohibiting reporters and editors from soliciting or accepting money, gifts, or patronage that could influence coverage. Where culturally appropriate tokens are unavoidable, the policy should set low-value thresholds, require disclosure, and prohibit coverage decisions by beneficiaries. Newsrooms should publish their ethics policies so audiences and sources know the rules.

The third remedy is stronger **editorial verification systems**. Yellow journalism thrives where speed overrides accuracy. Newsrooms should institutionalise pre-publication verification, source triangulation, headline review, correction notices, and separation of news from opinion, advertising, and sponsored content. Editors should treat headlines as ethical content, not merely marketing devices. A misleading headline can be as harmful as a false story.

The fourth remedy is credible **professional self-regulation**. The Nigerian Union of Journalists, Nigerian Guild of Editors, Newspaper Proprietors' Association of Nigeria, Nigerian Press Council, journalism schools, and civil society partners should collaborate on complaint-handling systems, ethics audits, public sanctions, and professional awards for integrity. The goal should not be punitive spectacle but restoration of trust through visible accountability.

The fifth remedy is **media literacy**. Citizens should be educated to recognise sensational headlines, undisclosed sponsored content, manipulated images, fake news, and politically motivated rumours. Guanah's findings on social media and citizen journalism show that the problem now extends beyond

conventional newsrooms (Guanah, 2024:67)[3]. Media literacy programmes should therefore target schools, universities, community organisations, religious groups, political actors, and online audiences.

The sixth remedy is protection of **press freedom and journalist safety**. Ethical journalism cannot flourish where journalists are harassed, assaulted, arrested, or legally intimidated for legitimate work. RSF's account of Nigeria's press-freedom environment indicates that surveillance, cybercrime prosecutions, violence, and impunity remain serious threats (Reporters Without Borders, 2026:n.p.)[7]. A safer press environment would strengthen investigative journalism and reduce dependence on patronage networks.

Reform area	Practical action	Expected impact
Welfare reform	Regular salaries, transport support, insurance, reporting budgets	Reduces economic vulnerability to inducement
Transparency policy	Gift registers, sponsored-content labels, anti-bribery declarations	Reduces hidden influence and strengthens audience trust
Editorial quality control	Verification desks, corrections policy, headline ethics review	Reduces sensationalism, misinformation, and reputational damage
Professional accountability	Independent complaints panels, public ethics audits, peer sanctions	Makes ethical codes credible and enforceable
Media literacy	Public education on fake news, clickbait, and source evaluation	Reduces audience demand for sensational misinformation
Press freedom protection	End arbitrary arrests, protect journalists, reform repressive laws	Enables independent journalism without fear or patronage dependence

Conclusion

Brown envelope journalism and yellow journalism are among the most damaging ethical problems facing Nigerian journalism. Brown envelope journalism corrupts the source-reporter relationship by making news judgement vulnerable to hidden inducement. Yellow journalism corrupts the reporter-audience relationship by replacing truth, balance, and proportion with sensationalism, exaggeration, and manipulation. Together, they weaken editorial independence, public trust, democratic accountability, professional identity, and social cohesion.

The evaluation in this article shows that these practices are sustained not only by individual moral failure but also by structural conditions: poor remuneration, delayed salaries, weak enforcement, ownership pressure, political patronage, social corruption, digital competition, and threats to press freedom. Nevertheless, structural explanation must not become moral excuse. Nigerian journalism already possesses strong ethical principles in its professional code. The urgent task is to make those

principles operational through welfare reform, transparent newsroom rules, credible self-regulation, stronger verification systems, media literacy, and protection of press freedom.

Ultimately, the Nigerian press cannot effectively challenge corruption in society while tolerating corruption in its own professional routines. Nor can it defend democracy while spreading sensationalism that misleads citizens and inflames division. The future of journalism in Nigeria depends on recovering the central promise of the profession: to provide truthful, independent, fair, and socially responsible information in the service of the public good.

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