

Bridging the Gap: Public Sphere Perception and Communication Challenges Between Nigerian Legislators and Citizens

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Abstract

This study explores the persistent communication deficit between elected legislators in Nigeria's National Assembly and the citizens they represent, with a particular focus on how this disconnection plays out in the public sphere. Despite the central role of the legislature in democratic governance, public sentiment in Nigeria has remained largely critical of its performance, transparency, and legitimacy. Drawing on three theoretical frameworks—Democratic-Participant Media Theory, Spiral of Silence Theory, and Habermas' theory of the Public Sphere—this paper investigates how political communication, or its absence, influences public opinion and institutional credibility. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study combines content analysis of fifty media texts (editorials, journal articles, opinion columns, and blog entries) with semi-structured interviews involving legislators, parliamentary aides, and retired clerks. Findings from the media analysis reveal a predominantly negative framing of the legislature, with 64% of sampled texts expressing critical or disapproving views. The interview responses reinforce this pattern, identifying a combination of representational confusion, communicative failure, and public disillusionment as major drivers of mistrust. The study concludes that communication is not merely an adjunct to legislative performance but is itself a constitutive element of democratic legitimacy. Strategic engagement through constituency consultations, digital platforms, media partnerships, and open-parliament initiatives could mitigate the existing trust deficit. Moreover, a rethinking of candidate selection processes and legislative capacity development is essential to building a professionalized, communicatively competent legislative culture. In sum, this paper argues that democracy in Nigeria will remain fragile unless elected representatives reimagine communication not as image control but as sustained, meaningful dialogue with the

electorate. The public sphere, after all, is not just where opinions are voiced—it is where legitimacy is earned or lost.

Keywords: Nigerian Legislature, Political Communication, Public Perception, Public Sphere, Representation, Strategic Engagement

Introduction

Democracy is often described in idealistic terms—a system where citizens, guided by reason and empowered by participation, shape the course of their own governance. While that vision may hold up in theory, its practice is often fraught with contradiction, complexity, and tension. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship between elected representatives and the public. In Nigeria, the case is particularly instructive. Despite operating within a formally democratic framework since 1999, the country's legislative institution—the National Assembly—continues to struggle with public legitimacy. Ordinary Nigerians frequently regard their legislators not as representatives of their interests, but as distant, self-serving elites detached from the realities of everyday life (Adeniyi, 2017; Akinola & Mosunmola, 2023). This perception is not without foundation. Over the past two decades, a pattern of legislative behaviour has emerged that many critics interpret as performative, opaque, and unresponsive. Issues such as excessive remuneration, lack of transparency in budgeting, and minimal constituency engagement have cast long shadows over the institution's democratic credentials. Civil society organizations, media commentaries, and even some political insiders have all voiced concerns about the seeming erosion of legislative accountability and public trust (Committee for the Defence of Human Rights, 2001; Odugbemi, 2008). Yet, the issue may not lie solely in what legislators do or fail to do—it may lie equally, if not more deeply, in how they communicate—or don't—with the public they claim to represent.

Communication in a democracy is not merely about messaging. It is, at its core, about presence, accountability, and mutual recognition. Elected representatives, especially in developing democracies like Nigeria, often underestimate the symbolic and practical power of communication. Legislative silence—particularly in moments of national crisis—can be interpreted as abandonment, complicity, or incompetence. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of digital and social media platforms has reshaped the public sphere into a more immediate, interactive, and often unforgiving space. As Habermas (1991) theorized, the public sphere is where citizens come together to deliberate over issues of shared concern. In Nigeria today, that sphere includes not just newspapers and radio programs, but also WhatsApp groups, YouTube channels, and hashtags on X (formerly Twitter). It is in these spaces that public perception is formed and, increasingly, solidified. Unfortunately, the Nigerian legislature has largely failed to keep pace with this changing communicative environment. Many legislators maintain limited or nonexistent digital presence. Constituency feedback mechanisms are often absent or symbolic at best. Public outreach—when it occurs—tends to be reactive rather than proactive, and more often designed for political optics than for meaningful dialogue (Ereke, 2021). This has created a vacuum that is quickly filled by speculation, criticism, and sometimes misinformation. The result is a widening trust deficit—what some have called a “communication crisis of representation” (Odeyemi, 2023).

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that the failure to communicate is not always the product of malice or incompetence. It is sometimes rooted in structural conditions that constrain legislative agency. High turnover rates, lack of institutional memory, poor media relations training, and limited funding for public engagement initiatives all contribute to the problem (Bankole, 2022; Fashagba & Nwankwor, 2020).

Additionally, the electorate itself often holds conflicting expectations of lawmakers—expecting them to function simultaneously as lawmakers, development agents, benefactors, and moral exemplars. When these expectations go unmet—as they often do—resentment builds, and the communicative gap becomes even harder to bridge. This study enters this fraught terrain with a set of guiding questions: How do Nigerians perceive their legislators, and how are those perceptions formed, amplified, or challenged in the public sphere? What role does communication—or its absence—play in shaping those views? And how can legislators develop strategies that reframe their relationship with the public in more transparent, participatory, and accountable ways?

To address these questions, this research adopts a mixed-methods approach. It conducts a content analysis of fifty media texts—ranging from editorials and blog posts to academic articles—examining the tone and themes present in discussions about the National Assembly. It then complements this with semi-structured interviews with insiders—retired clerks, current and former lawmakers, and legislative aides—to gain insight into how legislators understand their representational roles and communicative responsibilities. The theoretical lens includes the Democratic-Participant Media Theory (McQuail, 1987), which advocates for inclusive and decentralized communication systems; the Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), which explains how perceived opinion climates influence public expression; and Habermas' concept of the Public Sphere, which frames the importance of open, rational discourse in democratic governance. Ultimately, this paper argues that Nigeria's legislative crisis is, in large part, a communicative one. And unless that is addressed head-on—with strategic intent and structural reform—the legitimacy of the National Assembly will remain in question. Democracy cannot function in silence. Representation, as this study shows, must be seen and heard to be believed.

Literature Review

The relationship between elected representatives and their constituents remains one of the most vital—and most contested—elements in any democratic society. In contexts like Nigeria, where democratic institutions are still evolving and public trust is precarious, that relationship becomes even more complex. Numerous scholars have attempted to unpack the ways in which legislators engage (or fail to engage) with the electorate, how media shapes public perceptions of political authority, and what conditions foster or inhibit genuine representation. This review surveys key strands of the literature, focusing on three interrelated domains: (1) the role of the legislature in a democratic context; (2) the significance of public opinion and the public sphere; and (3) the communicative gaps that define the relationship between Nigeria's lawmakers and the electorate.

The legislature, often referred to as the "people's house," is widely recognized as a cornerstone of representative democracy. According to Laski (2008), the legislature serves as the principal channel through which the will of the people is expressed and codified into law. Mahajan (2012) reinforces this view by noting that legislative bodies are not only responsible for lawmaking but also for providing oversight of the executive and articulating the demands of diverse constituencies. In the Nigerian context, the constitutional mandate for legislative representation is clearly outlined in the 1999 Constitution (as amended), which vests the National Assembly with powers to make laws for peace, order, and good governance (Section 4). Yet, as Uganwa (2014) has noted, the Nigerian legislature often struggles to fulfill its democratic promise.

Problems such as legislative inexperience, high turnover rates, and weak institutional memory have frequently been cited as limiting factors (Bankole, 2022; Suleiman, 2022).

Moreover, the Nigerian National Assembly is often perceived not as a deliberative body but as a politicized extension of executive power or as a retirement home for ex-governors and political elites (Adegboruwa, 2023). Adeniyi (2017), drawing on both empirical data and public discourse, describes this perception as not only pervasive but increasingly institutionalized, undermining the legislature's credibility. In contrast to older democracies where long-standing parliamentary traditions confer legitimacy, Nigeria's legislature is still fighting to carve out a distinct and respected role within the democratic architecture. Jürgen Habermas' (1991) notion of the public sphere provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the evolving relationship between citizens and their representatives. The public sphere, as Habermas originally envisioned it, is a space where private individuals come together to discuss matters of public concern, and through such discourse, exert influence on state power. In modern contexts, this sphere is mediated through a variety of platforms—traditional news media, talk radio, blogs, social media—each with varying levels of openness and distortion (McQuail, 2010; Odugbemi, 2008).

In Nigeria, the public sphere has historically been shaped by a mix of oral, print, and increasingly digital communication. Scholars such as Oyero (2008) and Lai and Akanni (2018) have emphasized the role of media pluralism in democratizing public discourse. Platforms like Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, and online news portals have allowed citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers and voice their opinions in real time. However, as noted by Durodola (2018), this digital expansion has also led to new challenges—echo chambers, misinformation, and the weaponization of discourse. The legislature, as an institution, has struggled to maintain visibility and credibility in this chaotic communicative landscape. Ereke (2021) points out that Nigerian lawmakers rarely engage with the media proactively, allowing narratives about their inaccessibility and ineffectiveness to fester unchecked. This absence from the public sphere doesn't just reflect a communication gap—it actively widens the gulf between perception and reality. Empirical studies suggest that legislative performance is increasingly judged not just by what representatives do, but by how well they communicate what they do (Yusuff, Yosoff, & Zengeni, 2019). In other words, representation is no longer just about action—it's about narrative. And without a coherent narrative, even substantial legislative work can be easily overlooked or misinterpreted by the public.

One of the most consistent findings in both the literature and public commentary is the pervasive lack of communication between elected representatives and their constituents. This communication deficit manifests in several ways: infrequent constituency meetings, poor feedback mechanisms, and a general absence from both traditional and digital media spaces (Amuchiaz, 2021; Adetiba, 2020). Scholars such as Odeyemi (2023) and Schrumann & Stier (2022) argue that this failure to communicate is not simply a byproduct of logistical challenges but a structural feature of Nigeria's political system, which often rewards elite patronage over popular accountability. Constituency engagement is frequently limited to symbolic gestures—holiday greetings, funerals, and project commissioning ceremonies—rather than ongoing dialogue about policy, governance, or constituent needs.

This disconnect is compounded by what several researchers describe as a misalignment of expectations. The electorate often demands tangible, executive-style development—roads, schools, boreholes—while legislators insist that their constitutional role is to make laws and perform oversight (Abaribe, 2023). Without

clear communication to manage these expectations, resentment builds. As Doguwa (2023) notes, when legislators go silent during moments of national crisis—such as fuel price hikes or insecurity—the public assumes complicity or indifference. Several studies also emphasize the role of legislative capacity. High turnover rates mean that institutional knowledge is often lost, leaving new legislators to "start from scratch" every electoral cycle (Fashagba & Nwankwor, 2020). This churn not only weakens the legislature as an institution but makes sustained communication strategies nearly impossible.

Importantly, the literature points to solutions—not quick fixes, but long-term strategies. These include institutionalizing Open Parliament Initiatives, creating dedicated communication offices within legislators' teams, investing in public engagement training, and leveraging local languages and traditional forms of communication to reach diverse constituencies (Dare, 1985; Oloyede, 2008). Moreover, Yusuff et al. (2019) recommend strengthening the executive-legislative relationship through clearer communication channels and cooperative policy framing. When lawmakers speak with clarity, unity, and transparency, the public is more likely to trust the legislative process—even when outcomes are not immediately favourable.

Despite a growing body of literature on democratic communication and legislative behaviour, very few studies bring empirical data into conversation with theoretical models like the Democratic-Participant Media Theory or the Spiral of Silence. Even fewer studies focus explicitly on how media representations and public perception interact in the Nigerian context. This study attempts to bridge that gap by combining content analysis with interview-based fieldwork to shed light on the communication challenges faced by Nigerian legislators. The literature reviewed makes clear that democratic legitimacy is as much a function of perception as it is of performance. And in the age of digital media and citizen journalism, perception is increasingly shaped by communication—or the lack of it. Representation, then, cannot be assumed. It must be constantly performed, articulated, and renegotiated in the public sphere.

Theoretical Framework

To get a handle on this problem—this widening gap between public and parliament—we need some theoretical grounding. Three frameworks in particular offer useful tools for thinking through the layers involved here: the Democratic-Participant Media Theory, the Spiral of Silence, and Habermas' idea of the Public Sphere. Each of these approaches, in its own way, helps illuminate why communication breaks down and what might be at stake when it does. McQuail's Democratic-Participant Media Theory (1987) is a good place to start. It emerged as a critique of earlier models that, frankly, treated audiences as passive and media as monolithic. What McQuail argued—and others like Folarin (2002) have reinforced—is that communication should be reciprocal, decentralized, and participatory. Citizens, especially in marginal or poorly served communities, need access not just to information, but to platforms where their voices can be heard and responded to. This matters when we consider how little the average Nigerian hears directly from their representative, beyond election season.

The Spiral of Silence, from Noelle-Neumann (1974), adds a psychological layer. It suggests that when people perceive their views to be unpopular—or unsupported—they tend to fall silent. In a polarized environment, that silence compounds. Applied here, it might help explain why even legitimate criticisms of lawmakers sometimes fail to gain traction, or why political apathy grows despite visible frustration. And then there's Habermas (1991), whose idea of the public sphere as a site of rational discourse feels almost romantic now, but still resonates. Of course, today's public sphere is

chaotic, fractured across digital platforms and saturated with noise. But it remains a critical space where legitimacy is negotiated. If elected officials ignore or misread that space, they risk political irrelevance, or worse—open hostility (Odugbemi, 2008; COMMGAP, 2008). These theories don't offer solutions per se, but they do help frame the stakes: communication isn't peripheral to democracy—it's central to its survival.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach—partly out of necessity, partly out of curiosity. The central research questions call for both breadth and depth, so a combination of content analysis and qualitative interviews seemed appropriate. On the one hand, content analysis offers a way to systematically assess how the Nigerian legislature is represented across media sources—editorials, opinion pieces, blogs, and academic articles. On the other hand, interviews with political actors and insiders allow us to hear, in their own words, how lawmakers perceive their role and why they think the public has become so disenchanted. The idea was to triangulate: to use multiple sources not to "prove" a single truth, but to explore patterns and contradictions across platforms of public discourse and institutional narrative (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). For the content analysis, a purposive sampling method was used to select 50 texts published between 2019 and 2023. These included twelve newspaper editorials, thirteen peer-reviewed journal articles, fifteen opinion pieces, and ten blog entries—all dealing directly with public perceptions of the Nigerian National Assembly. Each text was coded for tone—positive, negative, or neutral—and themes were extracted around representation, accountability, and communication gaps. While simple in design, this method allows for a quick yet meaningful scan of how sentiment accumulates in the media over time (Krippendorff, 2013). Granted, such coding carries interpretive risks, but it still offers a valuable heuristic lens.

The interview component was more exploratory. Seven participants were selected—lawmakers, retired clerks, aides, and other parliamentary insiders. These were not anonymous voices but rather individuals with long-standing experience in Nigeria's legislative space. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person across various locations including Abuja, Ibadan, and Keffi. Questions were framed around their understanding of public perception, their efforts (or failures) in communicating with constituents, and their views on what could be done differently. Most interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, were recorded with consent, and later transcribed for thematic analysis. While this is a small sample, the depth of institutional insight it offered was, frankly, invaluable. These weren't scripted answers—they were, often, candid reflections on a deeply complex and, at times, frustrating relationship between lawmakers and the people they represent. It's worth noting that all interviews were conducted with ethical care. Participants were informed of the study's aims and gave verbal consent to be quoted, sometimes by name, sometimes more generally. Given the public nature of their roles and the non-sensitive nature of the inquiries, formal institutional review board clearance was not sought, though standard ethical guidelines for human-subject research were followed throughout (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

The content analysis revealed a remarkably consistent trend: public sentiment toward Nigeria's National Assembly is overwhelmingly negative. Out of the 50 media texts analyzed, 64% expressed outright disapproval of the legislature's conduct and credibility, while only 26% carried a positive tone. The remaining 10% were neutral,

mostly descriptive or ambivalent pieces. These numbers aren't just telling—they're damning. The media, as a mirror of public sentiment (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), appears to frame legislators not as democratic representatives, but as aloof elites, unaccountable and out of touch with their constituents. Editorials frequently emphasized the opacity of parliamentary processes, alleged self-enrichment, and an almost ritualistic silence on pressing national issues. Blog posts and opinion articles tended to be even more severe, often written in an angry, accusatory register. Academic sources—slightly more tempered—nonetheless echoed the same concern: that public trust in the legislature is waning, and that this erosion is closely tied to a broader crisis of democratic legitimacy (Akinola & Mosunmola, 2023; Adetiba, 2020). It's important to acknowledge that some positive views were present—mainly highlighting legislative oversight or policy contributions—but these were few and often couched in cautious praise. In general, the media landscape paints a picture of institutional failure, and it does so with surprising uniformity. These patterns are summarized in Table 1 below, which categorizes the sentiment distribution across the sampled media texts.

Table 1: Sentiment Distribution of Media Representations of the Nigerian National Assembly (2019–2023)

Sentiment Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Description
Negative	32	64%	Media texts critical of legislative opacity, inaccessibility, or self-interest.
Positive	13	26%	Texts highlighting achievements or legislative contributions.
Neutral	5	10%	Objective or descriptive texts with no clear evaluative tone.
Total	50	100%	—

Source: Content analysis of 50 media texts (editorials, opinion pieces, blogs, academic articles) conducted by the author.

The interviews offered something different—less statistical, more intimate. What emerged was a portrait of institutional anxiety. Many of the respondents were visibly aware of the legislature's image problem, and some were surprisingly candid about its roots. Senator Abaribe, for instance, pointed to the National Assembly's persistent tendency to drift into executive roles—trying to “do” rather than “legislate,” in his words. He noted that this confusion about purpose not only muddles the institution's identity but undermines its credibility: “We've never really had a long stretch of legislative tradition,” he observed, “so everyone still expects lawmakers to build roads or drill boreholes.” It's a misalignment of expectation that neither side—the public nor the parliament—seems ready to resolve. Other respondents echoed a similar frustration. Prince Ogunyomi, a retired Clerk, described what he called the

“aspirational gap” between voters and their representatives. “They expect miracles,” he said, “and when those don’t come, they turn hostile.” But this isn’t to suggest that lawmakers are mere victims of public impatience. Quite the contrary – many insiders acknowledged that most legislators have done little to build communicative bridges with their constituents. Routine engagement, constituency feedback loops, or even basic updates on legislative activities are often absent. As one former member of the House bluntly put it: “We disappear after elections. And then we wonder why they don’t trust us.”

What seems to emerge, then, is a mutually reinforcing loop of silence and suspicion. Legislators avoid the public because they fear hostility; the public grows more hostile because they are kept in the dark. The Spiral of Silence, as Noelle-Neumann (1974) described, plays out here not just among citizens but between institutions and those they serve. And because digital media platforms amplify opinion at a rapid and emotional pace, that silence can become deafening. Negative narratives spread fast, and in the absence of competing stories from legislators themselves, those narratives solidify. What’s more troubling is that this situation isn’t static – it’s deteriorating. In a democracy, where legitimacy is built on consent and performance, communication becomes more than a symbolic act – it becomes a survival strategy. As Odugbemi (2008) notes, the public sphere is not just a forum for talk; it’s where accountability is demanded and negotiated. Lawmakers who ignore this risk political irrelevance – or worse, a legitimacy crisis that no amount of constituency projects can fix. The findings here strongly suggest that communication should not be treated as public relations or damage control, but as an ongoing, substantive relationship. Trust, once lost, is hard to rebuild. But if there’s any route back, it likely begins with transparency, presence, and the humility to listen.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There’s no simple fix for the deepening rift between Nigeria’s elected legislators and the citizens they represent – but it’s clear that communication lies at the heart of it. What this study has shown, through both media analysis and first-hand accounts, is that the National Assembly suffers from more than just a perception problem. It faces a systemic breakdown in its relationship with the public – one shaped by historical mistrust, representational confusion, and a near-absence of deliberate, strategic dialogue. As long as lawmakers remain distant, and as long as citizens feel unheard, public opinion will continue to harden along lines of cynicism and disengagement. That said, it’s not entirely hopeless. The data – both textual and testimonial – suggest that some lawmakers are aware of the need for a new approach. But awareness isn’t action. If representation is to mean more than just showing up for elections, then legislators must invest in consistent, two-way communication with their constituencies. Not flashy campaigns or shallow PR gestures, but genuine, sustained presence – through town halls, local media, open digital channels, and legislative transparency. The “you cannot not communicate” axiom by Watzlawick et al. (2011) resonates here: silence is also a message, and often a damaging one.

Political parties, too, have a role to play. Candidate selection processes should be more deliberate, placing emphasis not just on electability or loyalty, but on communicative competence and constituency experience. Legislative capacity building programs – offered by institutions like NILDS – must go beyond policy training to include media engagement, digital literacy, and public listening strategies. Open Parliament Initiatives and Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations (PMOs), if given more institutional support, can serve as bridges between citizen feedback and parliamentary response. Perhaps most crucially, Nigeria’s democracy must begin to see

communication not as a peripheral soft skill, but as a central pillar of legislative effectiveness. Without it, even the most well-meaning policies will fail to resonate. With it, even flawed systems can be made more transparent, inclusive, and ultimately, more trusted. The task ahead is less about managing image and more about restoring connection. And for that, there is no shortcut—just the steady, often uncomfortable, but essential work of showing up and speaking honestly.

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