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DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY IN RIVERS STATE, NIGERIA: *A THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING ON SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT, POLITICAL INFORMATION CREDIBILITY, AND CITIZENS' TRUST IN GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS*

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Abstract
Rivers State is a demanding setting in which to test the claim that social media strengthens public accountability. The State is politically contested and economically central to the Nigerian federation, and in March 2025 it was placed under a six-month state of emergency that suspended its governor, deputy governor, and legislators. This paper advances a theoretical position on how digital political communication relates to public accountability in that setting. Drawing on media dependency theory, the public sphere tradition, Easton's account of political support, and Bovens's accountability framework, it argues that social media engagement does not produce accountability directly. Its effect passes through the perceived credibility of political information, which shapes citizens' trust in government institutions, and trust in turn determines whether citizens convert online claims into formal demands for answers. Six propositions are derived and tied to measurable indicators. The paper also considers how legal responses to online speech, including section 24 of the Cybercrimes Act as amended in 2024, alter the conditions under which engagement takes place. Implications are drawn for government communication offices, media organisations, civil society, and researchers working in Rivers State.

Keywords: digital political communication, public accountability, social media, information credibility, institutional trust

Introduction

Citizens can hold office holders to account only when they can obtain information about official conduct, judge whether that information is reliable, and expect that complaints addressed to institutions will be heard (Bovens, 2007; Fox, 2015). Digital platforms have lowered the cost of the first step and complicated the second and third. In Nigeria, social media has become a routine channel for political talk, mobilisation, and contestation (Akinyetun, 2022; Morah & Nwafor, 2024), and the same platforms carry rumour, hate speech, and fabricated content (Inobemhe et al., 2020; Suemo et al., 2024).

Rivers State illustrates the tension. Port Harcourt, its capital, is a centre of the oil economy and of national political competition. On 18 March 2025 the President declared a six-month state of emergency in the State and suspended the governor, his deputy, and members of the State legislature (Africa Check, 2025). In the same month, videos alleging explosions at oil and gas facilities circulated online, and the suspended governor described them as fake and as an attempt to heighten tension (Udoma, 2025). Later in 2025, posts claiming that the emergency had been

extended by a year circulated on Facebook without supporting evidence (Africa Check, 2025). Whatever the merits of the underlying political dispute, these episodes show citizens forming judgements about government conduct in an information environment where verification is difficult and official sources are themselves contested.

Nigerian scholarship has concentrated on elections and mobilisation (Benaiah & Osuntoki, 2024; Inobemhe, 2026; Okoli & Agantiem, 2023) and on fake news as a general problem (Apuke & Omar, 2021). Studies set in Rivers State have examined hate speech on social media (Aduko, 2021), new media and women's empowerment (Pepple et al., 2020), and the relationship between reporters and sources at the State House of Assembly (Pepple et al., 2019). In the studies reviewed for this paper, engagement, information credibility, and institutional trust are treated as separate topics. They are better understood as linked stages in a single accountability process, and that process needs to be examined at the sub-national level, where the institutions answerable to citizens are the State executive, the State legislature, local government councils, and the courts. Earlier studies have examined accountability in the State's institutions through information law (Amadi & Alikornwo, 2026), the governance of parastatals (Nwuzi & Alikornwo, 2026), and the resilience of federal agencies located in the State (Alikornwo & Amadi, 2026). The present paper extends that line of enquiry to the citizen side of the relationship, namely how political information reaches citizens and how far they trust it.

This paper takes a theoretical position and reports no new empirical data. It argues that social media engagement is necessary but insufficient for public accountability in Rivers State; that the perceived credibility of political information and citizens' trust in institutions are the mechanisms through which engagement can become accountability; and that the legal treatment of online speech is a condition that shapes the whole process. The paper defines its constructs, sets out the theoretical anchors, reviews relevant evidence, states six propositions with indicators for testing, and draws implications for practice and research.

Conceptual Clarifications

Digital Political Communication and Social Media Engagement

Digital political communication refers to the production, circulation, and reception of political messages through networked digital media by governments, parties, media organisations, and citizens (Chadwick, 2017; Jungherr et al., 2020). Social media engagement is used here in three layers: exposure to political content; interaction, such as commenting, sharing, and tagging officials; and mobilisation, meaning organised action that originates or is coordinated online (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). The distinction matters because the layers differ in accountability potential. Exposure raises awareness. Interaction creates a public record of claims. Mobilisation can generate pressure, but Boulianne's (2020) synthesis of two decades of research reports associations between digital media use and participation that are mostly positive and modest in size, which cautions against assuming strong effects.

Political Information Credibility

Credibility is a judgement made by the recipient and is not a fixed property of a message. Research on online information separates source, message, and medium credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013) and shows that users often rely on heuristics, such as endorsement by other users, which platform design can encourage (Sundar, 2008). Political information adds a further difficulty, since many users judge it through prior loyalty. The wider notion of information disorder, which separates misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), is useful for Rivers State because a single event can generate honest error, deliberate fabrication, and the selective release of true material.

Public Accountability

Following Bovens (2007), accountability is a relationship in which an actor feels obliged to explain and justify conduct to a forum, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences. Schedler (1999) separates answerability, the duty to inform and explain, from enforcement, the capacity to impose sanctions. Research on social accountability adds that information alone rarely produces enforcement. Fox (2015) distinguishes approaches that rely on information and citizen voice from those that combine voice with institutional capacity to respond, and reports stronger results for the second. This distinction is central to the argument below.

Citizens' Trust in Government Institutions

Trust in an institution is the expectation that it will act competently, honestly, and in the public interest without constant monitoring. Mayer et al. (1995) proposed ability, benevolence, and integrity as the bases of trustworthiness, and Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies (2017) developed a validated scale for citizen trust in government organisations on that foundation. Easton (1975) separated specific support, tied to the performance of incumbents, from diffuse support, tied to the regime and its institutions. Levi and Stoker (2000) point out that trust is judged about particular actors in particular domains, so trust in a governor need not equal trust in a court or an electoral commission.

National figures show a low baseline. A 2025 survey by the Africa Polling Institute reported that 83 per cent of respondents had little or no trust in the federal government and 82 per cent held the same view of the National Assembly (Guardian Nigeria, 2025). The sources consulted for this paper do not report comparable figures for Rivers State.

Theoretical Anchors

The Public Sphere and the Two Publics

Habermas (1989) describes a public sphere in which private persons debate matters of common concern and subject authority to rational scrutiny. Social media is often presented as a new site for this activity, but the conditions Habermas set, open access, equal standing, and orientation to reasons, are met only in part online (Tufekci, 2017). Ekeh's (1975) account of two publics in postcolonial Africa gives the idea local grounding. Ekeh argued that a civic public tied to the colonial state and a primordial public tied to ethnic and community bonds operate under different moral rules, and that people often owe duties to the second while extracting from the first. In a State with many ethnic nationalities and strong community institutions, online political talk may follow primordial loyalties more closely than civic norms, which would weaken the capacity of the digital sphere to scrutinise office holders.

Media Dependency Theory

Media dependency theory holds that the influence of media rises when audiences depend on them to meet understanding and orientation needs, especially during social change, conflict, or ambiguity (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). Contested periods such as the 2025 emergency create such conditions. Where trusted institutional channels are limited, citizens turn to social platforms, which gives informal publishers outsized influence. The theory therefore suggests that engagement will intensify during crises while the average quality of the information that audiences depend on declines.

Uses and Gratifications and Agenda Setting

Uses and gratifications research asks what audiences seek from media (Katz et al., 1973). Citizens may seek surveillance of official conduct, a sense of identity, entertainment, or a place to vent, and these motives affect whether engagement is oriented toward accountability. Agenda-setting research shows that the salience media give to issues influences public priorities (McCombs & Shaw,

1972). In the hybrid media system described by Chadwick (2017), agenda-setting power is shared among legacy outlets, party communications, bloggers, and ordinary users, whose content is repeatedly picked up and returned across platforms. A political claim in Rivers State can start on a blogger's page, appear in a radio discussion, and be rebroadcast by an official, which makes its origin hard for audiences to trace.

Political Support

Easton's (1965, 1975) framework treats legitimacy as a stock of support that allows a political system to survive unpopular decisions. Specific support erodes when outputs disappoint, and diffuse support erodes more slowly. Social media can speed the first and, through repeated delegitimising narratives, begin to wear down the second. Citizens who meet conflicting accounts of the same institutional event may conclude that all sources are unreliable. That withdrawal of trust is damaging to accountability because it removes the shared facts on which answerability depends.

Review of Related Evidence

Engagement and Participation

Large syntheses indicate that digital media use is positively but modestly associated with participation (Boulianne, 2020), and that social media use for news relates to civic and political participation partly through social capital (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe connective action, in which personalised content sharing coordinates collective action without formal organisations. Nigerian studies are consistent with these accounts. Akinyetun (2022), using a national web survey of 3,407 respondents, concluded that social media influences political efficacy and participation, and observed that the users in the sample were mostly young, male, educated, and unemployed. Inobemhe (2026) surveyed 548 respondents in Edo, Delta, and Rivers States and concluded that social media were influential in voter mobilisation in the 2023 election but did not hold absolute power over voter behaviour.

Work on the 2023 election has centred on the Obidient movement, examining its Twitter activity (Agbim et al., 2023), its mobilising effect (Benaiah & Osuntoki, 2024), and the language of contestation between supporters and opponents (Okoli & Agantiem, 2023). Chiamogu et al. (2021) examined the link between social media and group consciousness in socio-political protests, and Aina and Afolaranmi (2025) studied the effect of social media on political opinion before and during the 2023 election. These studies show that engagement is substantial among younger, connected citizens. They say less about whether engagement changes the behaviour of institutions, which is the accountability question.

Credibility, Misinformation, and Hate Speech

Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news travelled farther and faster than true news on Twitter, an effect driven mainly by human sharing and not by automated accounts. Lazer et al. (2018) called for interdisciplinary work on the structures that make fabricated content effective. African evidence is growing. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) examined fake news and media trust in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, and Madrid-Morales et al. (2021) compared motivations for sharing misinformation across six sub-Saharan African countries, Nigeria among them. Apuke and Omar (2021) modelled predictors of fake news sharing among social media users. Nigerian communication scholars have documented the proliferation of fake news (Inobemhe et al., 2020) and the factors behind hate speech in the digital environment (Suemo et al., 2024). For Rivers State, Aduko (2021) considered the implications of hate speech on social media for socio-political stability.

The 2025 episodes noted earlier, in which videos alleging explosions at oil and gas facilities were disowned as fake (Udoma, 2025) and a claim of extended emergency rule lacked supporting evidence (Africa Check, 2025), indicate that the credibility problem in the State is not confined to rumour among ordinary users. It involves claims about office holders and official responses to them.

Inobemhe et al. (2025) studied users' perceptions of social media amplification of political crisis and power tussle discourse in Nigeria, a theme close to the State's recent experience.

Trust and Institutional Responsiveness

The relationship between openness and trust is conditional. Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013), in a cross-national experiment, found that the effect of government transparency on trust differed between national settings. The survey of drivers of trust in public institutions by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2022) treats responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness, and fairness as the main determinants. Fox's (2015) review of social accountability evidence suggests that citizen voice produces weak results where institutions lack the capacity or will to respond. For Rivers State, these findings imply that publishing more official information, or generating more online comment, would not by itself raise trust.

Amadi and Alikornwo (2026) found that Rivers State ministries, departments and agencies have made progress in digitisation and administrative reform, but that the translation of information law into accountability outcomes remains uneven, constrained by weak enforcement, an underdeveloped records culture, and limited institutionalisation of freedom of information desks and data protection officers. Alikornwo and Amadi (2026) reported that federal agencies in the State show administrative fragility arising from infrastructural deficits, inconsistent records management, low regulatory enforcement capacity, and uneven cybersecurity preparedness. Nwuzi and Alikornwo (2026) argued that parastatals in the State operate within a reasonably developed formal accountability architecture whose practical value is reduced by institutional fragmentation and weak legislative follow-through. Gbafah et al. (2026) examined administrative communication efficiency in public tertiary institutions, with attention to artificial intelligence-driven communication accessories. These studies take institutions as their object. They indicate that a citizen who directs an online claim to a State agency may meet a desk that does not exist, a record that cannot be found, or an enforcement step that does not follow, which is the condition Fox (2015) describes as voice without institutional response. The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID, 2025) has published a report on citizens' perception of the state of emergency in Rivers State, which is a starting point for the State-level evidence on citizen views that this paper treats as limited.

Media Practice in Rivers State

Studies of media practice in the State bear on credibility. Pepple et al. (2019) studied friendship at the beat and the quest for objectivity among reporters covering the Rivers State House of Assembly. Esuh and Pepple (2016) studied the depth of coverage by traditional newsmen and the mobilisation of riverine communities for the 2015 general elections. Pepple et al. (2020) examined new media and the empowerment of women in the State. The first two predate the current social media environment and place source relations and the geographic reach of coverage on the research agenda for the State. An account of digital credibility in Rivers State should therefore treat legacy media practice as part of the baseline and not as a separate matter. Amadi and Nwaubeta (2018) studied public relations strategies in flood management in Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor, and Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, using 250 retrieved questionnaires. Respondents most often favoured a combination of channels that included traditional media, and majorities described funding as very poor and government bureaucracy as a negative influence. The study concerns a different crisis, but it shows that public communication in the State relies on mixed channels and that official bureaucracy is seen as a constraint, both of which bear on how credibility is established.

Theoretical Position and Propositions

The Core Argument

The position advanced here is that social media engagement is a necessary but insufficient condition for public accountability in Rivers State. Engagement produces visibility and a public record of claims. Accountability, in Bovens's (2007) sense, additionally requires that an official forum receives the

claim, that the claim is believed enough to warrant a response, and that a consequence is possible. Credibility and trust are the mechanisms that carry engagement toward that point. Where information is not credible, a claim cannot become a shared fact. Where trust is low, citizens do not expect the institution to respond and may not address it at all, turning instead to private or primordial channels in Ekeh's (1975) sense.

The sequence can be stated simply: engagement raises exposure and generates claims; the perceived credibility of those claims shapes trust; trust shapes whether claims are directed to formal forums; and institutional responsiveness determines whether answerability becomes enforcement. Table 1 sets out the constructs and indicators, and Table 2 states the propositions.

Table 1

Constructs, Working Definitions, and Suggested Indicators

Construct	Working definition	Suggested indicators
Social media engagement	Exposure to political content, interaction with it, and online-coordinated mobilisation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).	Frequency of political news use on platforms; commenting, sharing, and tagging of officials; participation in online campaigns or petitions.
Political information credibility	The recipient's judgement of the believability of political information, considering source, message, and medium (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).	Perceived believability of posts from officials, media houses, and bloggers; self-reported verification behaviour; exposure to claims later debunked.
Citizens' trust in institutions	Expected competence, benevolence, and integrity of a named institution (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017; Mayer et al., 1995).	Scale scores for the State executive, State House of Assembly, local government council, courts, and electoral commission, reported separately.
Public accountability	Answerability and enforcement between officials and a forum (Bovens, 2007; Schedler, 1999).	Freedom of Information requests lodged and answered; petitions to the legislature; court actions; documented official responses to online claims.
Legal environment for online speech	Rules and enforcement practices that govern what citizens may say online about office holders.	Reported arrests or charges linked to online political speech; self-censorship reported by respondents.

Note. Indicators are suggestions for future empirical work and are not drawn from a single instrument.

Table 2

Propositions, Theoretical Basis, and Testable Implications

No.	Proposition	Theoretical basis	Testable implication
P1	Higher social media engagement in Rivers State is associated with greater exposure to claims about official conduct, but exposure alone is not associated with formal accountability action.	Boulianne (2020); Fox (2015)	Engagement predicts awareness of claims but not petitions, requests, or court actions once trust is controlled.

No.	Proposition	Theoretical basis	Testable implication
P2	The association between engagement and trust in institutions is mediated by perceived credibility of political information.	Metzger & Flanagin (2013); Mayer et al. (1995)	Credibility scores account for a significant part of the engagement-trust association in mediation models.
P3	During contested political events, perceived credibility falls and trust becomes more volatile because dependence on informal sources rises while verification capacity does not.	Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976); Vosoughi et al. (2018); Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)	Panel data show larger swings in credibility and trust in crisis periods than in ordinary periods.
P4	Trust moderates the conversion of online claims into formal answerability demands.	Bovens (2007); Levi & Stoker (2000)	Respondents with low trust in an institution are less likely to address claims to it, and institutions with functioning Freedom of Information desks receive more formal requests.
P5	Dialogic and verifiable official communication raises trust more than one-way publicity, and the effect is stronger where institutions show capacity to respond.	Fox (2015); Grimmelikhuijsen et al. (2013); OECD (2022); Amadi & Alikornwo (2026)	Trust gains follow documented responses to citizen claims and not volume of official posts.
P6	Reliance on criminal sanctions for online speech narrows candid engagement without improving credibility, whereas verification-based responses improve credibility without narrowing engagement.	Wardle & Derakhshan (2017); Constitution ss. 22 and 39	Self-censorship and credibility scores differ between settings with different enforcement practices.

Note. P6 is offered as a hypothesis resting on theory and on legal developments, not on direct evidence from the State.

The Legal Environment

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria places two commitments side by side. Section 22 charges the mass media with upholding the responsibility and accountability of government to the people, and section 39 guarantees freedom of expression. The Freedom of Information Act 2011 supplies a statutory route for citizens to obtain records from public institutions. Against these stands the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, as amended in 2024. In 2020 the ECOWAS Court held that section 24 of the 2015 Act violated the right to freedom of expression and directed Nigeria to amend it (Incorporated Trustees of Laws and Rights Awareness Initiative v. Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2020). The National Assembly later amended the Act (Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) (Amendment) Act, 2024). In a fresh challenge to the amended section 24, the Court dismissed the application in 2025, holding that the applicant had not proved a violation and noting that media reports and hyperlinks, without witness evidence or judicial records, did not establish a pattern of arbitrary application (Community Court of Justice, ECOWAS, 2025).

The 2025 decision records an evidential shortfall and does not certify the provision as free of risk to expression. For this paper, the relevance is that the legal frame governing online political speech remains unsettled, and the effect of that frame on engagement, credibility, and trust is an empirical question. Proposition 6 states one expectation about that effect.

Implications

For Government Communication Offices

The disavowal of fabricated videos by the suspended governor (Udoma, 2025) is an example of rebuttal. The propositions suggest that rebuttal alone is unlikely to restore credibility unless it is accompanied by material the public can check, such as primary documents, dated statements, and named contacts. Offices at the State and local government levels should also treat answers to Freedom of Information requests and to citizens' queries on official platforms as part of communication practice and not as a separate administrative duty, because Proposition 5 ties trust to demonstrated responsiveness. The findings of Amadi and Alikornwo (2026) on weak freedom of information desks and records culture suggest that the first practical step is institutional: a desk that receives, logs, and answers requests.

For Media Organisations

Media houses in Port Harcourt and across the State occupy the middle of the information chain described by Chadwick (2017). Verification desks, public correction practices, and attribution of sources would address the problem of untraceable origin. Collaboration with established fact-checking services, such as Africa Check, which works under Meta's third-party fact-checking programme (Africa Check, 2025), offers a route that smaller newsrooms can use. Attention to riverine communities, raised by Esuh and Pepple (2016), remains relevant for ensuring that credibility efforts reach audiences outside Port Harcourt.

For Civil Society and Regulators

Civil society groups can build accountability by moving from online complaint to formal requests, petitions, and legal action, since Proposition 4 expects that this conversion depends on trust and on evidence of past responsiveness. Regulators and prosecutors face a choice between enforcement and verification as responses to false content. Proposition 6 suggests that the former may carry costs for engagement without improving credibility, and the point deserves testing before it is assumed.

For Researchers

A programme of testing should use sampling frames that include riverine local government areas as well as Port Harcourt and Obio-Akpor, measure trust separately for each institution using an adapted version of the Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies (2017) scale, and measure credibility by source, message, and medium. A panel design that spans a contested period and an ordinary period is needed for Proposition 3. Mixed methods would allow survey results on trust to be read alongside content analysis of public posts and interviews with officials, journalists, and community leaders. The Reuters Institute's annual survey of news use, which includes Nigeria, offers a benchmark against which State-level results could be compared (Newman et al., 2024).

Limitations

This is a position paper and reports no primary data. Much of the evidence reviewed is national, and Rivers State evidence on trust and credibility is thin. Statements about individual Nigerian studies are confined to their stated aims, designs, and conclusions. The legal discussion is limited to the instruments and decisions named and do not review other state-level rules on speech or information.

CONCLUSION

Social media gives citizens of Rivers State a means of speaking about government conduct, but speech becomes accountability only when the information is believed, the institution is trusted enough to be addressed, and the institution is able to answer. The six propositions

stated here link engagement, credibility, trust, and responsiveness in a testable sequence and place the legal treatment of online speech among the conditions that shape it. The most useful next step is empirical work in the State that measures these links across both ordinary and contested periods.

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