

Media and Governance in Fragile Democracies: Reporting Corruption, Human Rights, and Peacebuilding through the Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT)

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Abstract

The media is widely recognised as a cornerstone of democratic governance, contributing to transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. In fragile and post-conflict democracies, however, its effectiveness as a governance actor remains uneven. This paper examines the role of media in reporting corruption, human rights, and peacebuilding, using Sierra Leone as an illustrative context. Drawing on democratic accountability theory and normative media theory, it introduces the **Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT)** as an original analytical framework. The MGAT conceptualises media-driven governance outcomes as dependent on the convergence of three interdependent pillars: informational power, normative legitimacy, and institutional responsiveness. Using a qualitative, desk-based approach, the study synthesises empirical and theoretical literature to show why media exposure alone rarely produces accountability. The findings demonstrate that sustainable governance outcomes require alignment between investigative capacity, ethical journalism, and responsive institutions. The paper contributes a context-sensitive framework with direct relevance for media reform and democratic consolidation in fragile democracies.

Keywords

Media, Governance, Accountability, Corruption, Human Rights, Peacebuilding, Fragile States

1. Introduction

The relationship between media and governance has occupied a central position

in democratic theory and development discourse for several decades. Within contemporary governance systems, media institutions are commonly conceptualised as watchdogs, agenda setters, and intermediaries between the state and citizens, performing essential functions related to transparency, accountability, and democratic participation. Through investigative journalism, public-interest reporting, and sustained scrutiny of power, the media generates and disseminates information that enables citizens to evaluate public authority and engage meaningfully in political life (Stapenhurst, 2000; Schudson, 2008).

The capacity of the media to perform these democratic functions, however, depends substantially on the institutional and political environment within which it operates. For the purposes of this study, **fragile democracies** are understood as political systems in which competitive democratic institutions and processes formally operate. However, their effectiveness is constrained by persistent institutional and societal weaknesses. These may include limited institutional capacity and accountability, weak political inclusion and social trust, deficiencies in the rule of law, and limited resilience to political and socioeconomic shocks. This understanding draws on the OECD's multidimensional conception of fragility as the interaction between exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of states, systems, and communities to manage or mitigate such risks (OECD, 2022). Fragility is therefore treated here as a matter of degree rather than as synonymous with state failure or active conflict.

Sierra Leone provides an appropriate illustrative context because it combines several characteristics central to this definition: a post-conflict democratic trajectory, regular multiparty elections, expanding media pluralism, and formal accountability institutions alongside continuing challenges involving corruption, institutional capacity, human-rights protection, political polarisation, access to justice, and peace consolidation. The country therefore offers a useful setting for examining how comparatively vibrant media institutions interact with uneven governance and accountability structures without treating Sierra Leone as representative of all fragile democracies.

Against this contextual background, the presence of a pluralistic media environment should not be assumed to translate automatically into stronger governance outcomes. The governance impact of media is neither automatic nor uniform. In fragile and post-conflict democracies, the role of the media is simultaneously amplified by weak formal accountability institutions and constrained by adverse political, legal, and economic conditions (O'Donnell, 1998; Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith, 2005). Political interference, restrictive legal frameworks, economic precarity, and uneven professional capacity frequently undermine the media's ability to translate exposure into accountability (Howard, 2004; Voltmer, 2013).

These broader constraints provide an important analytical lens through which the Sierra Leonean experience can be understood. Despite notable gains in media pluralism and electoral competition since the end of the civil war, Sierra Leone continues to face governance challenges relating to corruption, human-rights pro-

tection, and peace consolidation (Freedom House, 2023). Consequently, while media reporting has enhanced public awareness of governance failures, outcomes in terms of institutional sanction and reform have remained uneven.

In response, this paper advances the **Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT)** as its guiding analytical framework. The MGAT conceptualises media-driven governance outcomes as contingent upon the interaction of informational power, normative legitimacy, and institutional responsiveness. By applying this framework, the study examines how media reporting on corruption, human rights, and peacebuilding shapes governance outcomes in fragile democracies, situating Sierra Leone within a broader comparative context while remaining attentive to local political and institutional realities.

2. Problem Statement

Despite broad scholarly consensus that media plays a vital role in promoting good governance, empirical outcomes across fragile democracies remain uneven. While some contexts have experienced tangible governance improvements following sustained media exposure of corruption or human rights abuses, others continue to exhibit elite impunity, declining public trust in media institutions, and limited institutional response to journalistic revelations (Berti et al., 2020; Norris, 2000). This divergence challenges linear assumptions within democratic accountability theory that information disclosure naturally leads to sanction.

In Sierra Leone, media pluralism has expanded significantly since the end of the civil war, with the proliferation of private newspapers, radio stations, and digital platforms enhancing access to information and public debate (MRCG, 2022). Yet corruption remains a structural concern, human rights violations continue to surface, and peacebuilding requires sustained civic engagement (Transparency International, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022). This raises a critical analytical question: **why does increased media presence not consistently translate into stronger governance outcomes?**

This paper addresses the structural gap between the normative expectations placed on media as a governance actor and the relational conditions required for media-driven accountability to function effectively. Understanding this gap is essential for informing media reform and governance interventions in fragile democracies.

3. Literature Review: Media and Governance through the MGAT Lens

3.1. Informational Power: Media, Transparency, and Exposure

Democratic accountability theory emphasises that citizens can only evaluate and sanction leaders when they possess credible information about government performance (Przeworski et al., 1999). Within this framework, the media functions as a primary generator and distributor of politically relevant information.

Stapenhurst (2000) argue that media exposure of corruption raises the political

costs of malfeasance by mobilising public pressure. Empirical studies reinforce this claim, demonstrating that investigative journalism plays a critical role in uncovering corruption and policy failure (Brunetti & Weder, 2003; Berti et al., 2020). However, scholars caution that exposure alone does not guarantee accountability. Fox (2007) highlights instances of “weak accountability”, where information disclosure increases visibility without producing consequences. These insights underscore the MGAT premise that informational power is necessary but insufficient for governance impact.

3.2. Normative Legitimacy: Ethics, Trust, and Social Responsibility

Normative media theory shifts analytical focus from what media does to what media ought to do in democratic societies. The social responsibility model argues that media freedom must be balanced with ethical obligations to accuracy, fairness, and public interest (Siebert et al., 1956; McQuail, 2010).

Public trust emerges as a central mediating variable. Norris (2000) demonstrates that media credibility conditions whether information translates into civic engagement. In fragile and post-conflict contexts, irresponsible or sensational reporting can undermine peacebuilding and democratic legitimacy (Howard, 2004; Voltmer, 2013). Ethical failure erodes informational power by converting exposure into noise or propaganda (Couldry, 2012).

3.3. Institutional Responsiveness: Enforcement and Sanction

Governance scholarship emphasises that accountability is incomplete without sanction (O'Donnell, 1998; Schedler, 1999). Institutional responsiveness refers to the capacity and willingness of formal institutions—courts, anti-corruption agencies, legislatures—to act upon media-generated information. Thus, research shows that media exposure is more likely to produce reform where institutions are independent and capable (Brunetti and Weder, 2003). Where institutions are weak or politicised, exposure often reinforces impunity. This literature substantiates the MGAT's third pillar, highlighting institutional responsiveness as a decisive mediator.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1. The Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT)

This study introduces the **Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT)** as an integrated analytical framework synthesising insights from democratic accountability theory and normative media theory. The MGAT conceptualises media not merely as an external observer of governance, but as an **accountability intermediary** whose capacity to influence governance outcomes is relational and conditional. Specifically, the framework posits that media-driven accountability emerges only at the **convergence of three interdependent pillars: informational power, normative legitimacy, and institutional responsiveness**.

The triangular logic depicted in **Figure 1** underscores the central theoretical claim of this study: *media exposure alone is insufficient to produce accountability*. Where informational power is not underpinned by ethical credibility, or where institutions lack the capacity or autonomy to enforce sanction, accountability outcomes become symbolic rather than substantive. By visually and analytically integrating these dimensions, the MGAT provides a context-sensitive framework for explaining both the successes and limitations of media in governance, particularly in fragile and post-conflict democracies.

The Media–Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT): A Logic Model for Media-Driven Governance Outcomes



Figure 1. The Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT).

4.2. Core Propositions of the MGAT

Building on the broader accountability literature (e.g., Besley & Prat, 2006), the MGAT advances three related propositions. **First**, informational power, normative legitimacy, and institutional responsiveness are individually necessary but, in isolation, insufficient conditions for sustained media-driven accountability. Informational power makes governance failures visible; normative legitimacy gives such information credibility and the capacity to mobilise civic attention; and institutional responsiveness converts exposure and public pressure into investigation, remedy, sanction, or reform. **Second**, the three pillars are mutually reinforcing rather than merely additive: credible journalism strengthens the public and institutional value of information, while visible institutional responses can reinforce public confidence in both media and governance institutions. Conversely, serious weakness in any one pillar can interrupt the accountability chain and produce what the MGAT terms **accountability asymmetry**—high public visibility without commensurate institutional consequence. **Third**, the convergence of all three pillars increases the likelihood of substantive governance outcomes, although

their operation remains conditioned by the wider political, legal, economic, technological, and professional environment. The MGAT therefore proposes a relational and conditional, rather than deterministic, explanation of media-driven accountability.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, desk-based research design, **using a structured review and thematic synthesis** of relevant academic literature, policy reports, institutional publications, and governance assessments (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Rather than constituting a formal systematic review or meta-analysis, the review is designed principally for conceptual development and analytical synthesis. Sources were selected purposively according to their relevance to four interconnected areas: *media and democratic accountability*, *media ethics and public trust*, *institutional responsiveness and governance*, and *media engagement with corruption, human rights*, and *peacebuilding in fragile and post-conflict settings*.

The review prioritised peer-reviewed scholarship and reports from recognised national and international institutions, with particular attention to literature capable of illuminating the Sierra Leonean context. Sources were considered relevant where they addressed at least one of the following: media exposure and investigative journalism; transparency and accountability; professional and ethical journalism; institutional investigation, enforcement, or sanction; corruption; human-rights reporting; conflict-sensitive journalism; or peacebuilding. Materials lacking clear relevance to these analytical domains were excluded from the substantive synthesis. The purpose of this selection strategy was not to claim exhaustive coverage of the literature, but to assemble a theoretically and contextually relevant evidence base for developing and applying the MGAT framework.

The thematic synthesis was explicitly guided by the **Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT)**. Evidence was organised and interpreted according to its three core dimensions: 1) **informational power**, referring to the media's capacity to investigate, interpret, and disseminate governance-relevant information; 2) **normative legitimacy**, concerning professional ethics, verification, conflict sensitivity, and public credibility; and 3) **institutional responsiveness**, referring to the capacity and willingness of governance institutions to investigate, sanction, remedy, or reform in response to credible public-interest reporting. Evidence relating to corruption, human rights, and peacebuilding was subsequently compared across these dimensions to identify common mechanisms as well as domain-specific accountability pathways.

Sierra Leone is employed as an *illustrative contextual case rather than a full empirical case study*. Its post-conflict trajectory, expanding media environment, formal accountability institutions, and continuing governance challenges provide an analytically useful setting in which to examine the relationships proposed by the MGAT. Accordingly, Sierra Leonean evidence is used to illustrate and interrogate the framework rather than to establish causal effects or claim statisti-

cal representativeness.

6. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that while Sierra Leone's media has exhibited growing *informational power*, particularly through investigative journalism and agenda-setting on corruption and governance failures, this capacity has not consistently translated into substantive accountability outcomes (Stapenhurst, 2000; Brunetti and Weder, 2003). As illustrated in **Figure 1**, informational power constitutes only one vertex of the Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT). Viewed through the MGAT framework, the Sierra Leonean context suggests a potential imbalance between increasing media visibility and the institutional conditions required to translate exposure into enforcement. This pattern is consistent with the broader accountability literature, which demonstrates that increased transparency or media freedom does not necessarily produce commensurate institutional consequences (Fox, 2007; Berti et al., 2020).

Media reporting across print, radio, and digital platforms forms part of Sierra Leone's wider public accountability environment, drawing attention to allegations of corruption, misuse of public resources, and other governance concerns (MRCCG, 2022). However, the available evidence does not establish that particular Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) investigations or sanctions were initiated directly as a result of specific media exposés. The relationship between media exposure and formal anti-corruption action should therefore be interpreted as potentially contributory rather than automatically causal. This qualification is consistent with the broader accountability literature, which demonstrates that increased transparency and public visibility do not necessarily translate into institutional sanction or reform (O'Donnell, 1998; Fox, 2015).

Country-level institutional evidence nevertheless demonstrates that the media operates within Sierra Leone's broader anti-corruption accountability environment. The ACC reported that its Investigation Department handled 441 cases in 2023, including 184 carried over from 2022, and concluded examination of 81 cases during the reporting year. The Commission also notes that corruption-related issues may be identified through newspaper publications and documents its monitoring of major radio and television outlets as part of its public-education and outreach activities (Anti-Corruption Commission Sierra Leone (ACC), 2023). These findings establish an institutional interface between media communication and anti-corruption oversight, but they should not be interpreted as evidence that the reported ACC caseload was generated by media exposés. The figures and institutional-media interaction are directly documented in the ACC's official 2023 Annual Report.

Institutional responsiveness is further conditioned by constraints within Sierra Leone's justice system. UNDP reports that the judiciary is underfunded and understaffed and that protracted criminal proceedings contribute to significant case backlogs. In response, Judicial Week and Prison-Court initiatives cleared 802 back-

logged cases in 2023, representing 77 per cent of the identified backlog as of September that year (UNDP, 2023). The U.S. Department of State similarly reports that the limited number of state attorneys contributes to lengthy trial delays, while delays in appeals can exceed two years (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Taken together, this evidence supports the MGAT proposition that media visibility operates within a wider institutional environment. Whether exposure contributes to investigation, sanction, or remedial action therefore depends partly on the capacity and responsiveness of the institutions through which accountability must proceed.

Normative legitimacy presents a related but analytically distinct issue. The broader media and governance literature indicates that political alignment, commercial pressures, sensationalism, and uneven adherence to professional standards can weaken perceptions of media credibility and public trust (McQuail, 2010; Norris, 2000; Voltmer, 2013; Ward, 2010). In the absence of sufficiently robust Sierra Leone-specific survey evidence establishing the direction or magnitude of changes in public trust, this study does not claim that public trust in Sierra Leonean journalism has demonstrably declined. Rather, it treats trust as a theoretically important mediating condition whose vulnerability to political and commercial pressures is documented in the wider literature. Sierra Leone's media environment is therefore used illustratively to examine how questions of credibility may affect the relationship between information, civic response, and institutional accountability.

Human rights reporting presents a parallel pattern. Media coverage of police conduct, detention conditions, and gender-based violence has raised awareness and advocacy, yet institutional follow-up has often been uneven or slow (Amnesty International, 2023; Freedom House, 2023). As Figure 1 indicates, without institutional responsiveness, such reporting risks normalising violations rather than deterring them (Howard, 2004).

Taken together, these imbalances illustrate a governance environment in which increased media exposure may raise public awareness without consistently altering institutional behaviour. The broader literature suggests that such accountability gaps can contribute to public cynicism and weaken confidence in both media and governance institutions (Norris, 2000). The MGAT framework thus explains media-governance relations in Sierra Leone as *relational rather than linear*: media effectiveness depends not simply on exposure, but on ethical credibility and institutional alignment. Grounded in Sierra Leonean examples, this discussion demonstrates the explanatory power of MGAT and the diagnostic value of Figure 1 for identifying accountability gaps in fragile and post-conflict democracies (Voltmer, 2013; Fox, 2015).

Domain-Specific Accountability Pathways under the MGAT

To clarify how the MGAT translates its three core pillars into practical accountability processes, it is important to distinguish the pathways through which media reporting operates across different governance domains. These domain-specific accountability pathways are systematically presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Domain-Specific accountability pathways under the MGAT.

Domain	Table element	Details
Corruption	Media/informational pathway	Investigative reporting → disclosure of alleged misuse/irregularity → public scrutiny
	Principal institutions	ACC, Audit Service Sierra Leone, Parliament/oversight committees, courts, relevant MDAs
	Civic intermediaries	CSOs, anti-corruption advocates, professional associations, citizens
	Expected accountability outcomes	Investigation, administrative action, prosecution/sanction, asset recovery, and institutional reforms that reduce corruption risk and improve transparency
Human rights	Media/informational pathway	Documentation/publication of abuses → victim visibility → advocacy/public pressure
	Principal institutions	Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone Police accountability mechanisms, judiciary, Parliament and relevant ministries
	Civic intermediaries	Human-rights CSOs, legal-aid organisations, women's organisations, victims' groups/community organisations
	Expected accountability outcomes	Investigation of violations, protection measures, access to justice, remedies/compensation, and policy or institutional reforms to prevent future violations
Peacebuilding	Media/informational pathway	Conflict-sensitive reporting → countering inflammatory narratives/misinformation → dialogue and early warning
	Principal institutions	National peace architecture, electoral institutions where relevant, security institutions, local government and traditional/local authorities
	Civic intermediaries	Religious leaders, community radio, CSOs, youth/women's organisations, community leaders
	Expected accountability outcomes	De-escalation of tensions, community dialogue, conflict prevention, social cohesion, and inclusive local peacebuilding outcomes

The table presents the domain-specific accountability pathways of the Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT), showing how media activity may connect with institutional and civic processes to generate governance outcomes across corruption, human rights, and peacebuilding. It operationalises the MGAT by linking five elements: the governance domain, the media or informational pathway, principal institutions, civic intermediaries, and expected accountability outcomes. It demonstrates that although the three domains are analysed through the common MGAT principles of informational power, normative legitimacy, and

institutional responsiveness, the actors, mechanisms, and anticipated outcomes differ according to the governance issue involved.

In the **corruption domain**, the accountability pathway begins with investigative reporting that discloses alleged misuse, irregularities, or other matters of public concern and subjects them to public scrutiny. Formal institutional responsibility rests principally with bodies such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), Audit Service Sierra Leone, parliamentary oversight committees, the courts, and relevant ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs). Civil society organisations, anti-corruption advocates, professional associations, and citizens serve as important intermediaries between public disclosure and institutional action. Where these elements function effectively, expected outcomes include investigation, administrative action, prosecution or sanction, asset recovery, and institutional reforms aimed at reducing corruption risks and strengthening transparency.

For **human rights**, the pathway centres on documenting and publicising abuses, increasing the visibility of victims, and stimulating advocacy and public pressure. Relevant institutions include the Human Rights Commission of Sierra Leone, Sierra Leone Police accountability mechanisms, the judiciary, Parliament, and responsible ministries. Human-rights organisations, legal-aid organisations, women's organisations, victims' groups, and community organisations constitute the principal civic intermediaries. The expected outcomes extend beyond exposure to include investigation of violations, protection measures, improved access to justice, remedies or compensation, and policy or institutional reforms intended to prevent future violations.

The **peacebuilding pathway** differs because its primary purpose is preventive and conciliatory rather than principally investigative or punitive. Conflict-sensitive reporting can counter inflammatory narratives and misinformation while facilitating dialogue and early warning. The institutional actors include the national peace architecture, relevant electoral and security institutions, local government, and traditional or local authorities. Religious leaders, community radio, civil society organisations, youth and women's organisations, and community leaders provide important civic linkages. Expected outcomes include de-escalation of tensions, community dialogue, conflict prevention, strengthened social cohesion, and more inclusive local peacebuilding.

Taken together, the table demonstrates an important feature of the **MGAT framework: media exposure is not treated as an accountability outcome in itself**. Rather, information must interact with credible civic intermediaries and responsive institutions before it can contribute to substantive governance outcomes. The pathways also show that accountability assumes different forms across domains—**investigation and sanction in corruption; protection, justice, and remedy in human rights; and dialogue, prevention, and social cohesion in peacebuilding**. Thus, **Table 1** translates the MGAT from an abstract conceptual framework into a domain-sensitive model of how media-driven accountability may operate in practice.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that delimit the interpretation of its findings. First, its qualitative, desk-based design relies on secondary academic and institutional sources rather than original interviews, surveys, content analysis, or longitudinal observations. Second, Sierra Leone is employed as an illustrative contextual case rather than as a systematically tested empirical case; consequently, the analysis is intended to illuminate the plausibility and analytical utility of the MGAT rather than establish causal effects of media reporting on governance outcomes. Third, the relationships proposed among informational power, normative legitimacy, institutional responsiveness, and accountability outcomes remain theoretically derived and require further empirical testing across different political and media environments. Accordingly, observed associations between media exposure and institutional responses should not be interpreted as evidence that media reporting independently caused particular investigations, sanctions, reforms, or peacebuilding outcomes. Future research should test the MGAT through comparative case studies, interviews, media-content analysis, process tracing, and, where feasible, longitudinal or mixed-method designs.

8. Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of media in governance with particular emphasis on corruption, human rights, and peacebuilding in fragile democracies. It argues that media-driven accountability emerges only through the convergence of informational power, normative legitimacy, and institutional responsiveness, as conceptualised in the *Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT)* framework.

By reframing media as an embedded accountability intermediary, the MGAT offers a transferable analytical tool for understanding variation in media effectiveness across fragile democracies. For Sierra Leone, the findings underscore the need for integrated media and governance reform that aligns investigative capacity, ethical journalism, and institutional enforcement, rather than treating press freedom as an isolated intervention. As synthesised in **Figure 1**, the MGAT demonstrates that sustainable media-driven governance outcomes are more likely to emerge where these three pillars converge within an enabling political and institutional context.

9. Policy Recommendations: Applying the MGAT Framework

Drawing on the Media-Governance Accountability Triangle (MGAT), this study proposes targeted policy recommendations to strengthen the contribution of media to governance in Sierra Leone and comparable fragile democracies.

First, **informational power** should be enhanced through sustained investment in investigative journalism. This includes improving access to public information, supporting data-driven reporting, and strengthening the technical capacity of journalists—particularly at local and community levels—so that media exposure is ev-

idence-based, credible, and accessible to citizens.

Second, **normative legitimacy** must be reinforced by prioritising professional ethics and public trust. Media stakeholders should strengthen self-regulatory mechanisms, promote conflict-sensitive and rights-based reporting, and reduce political and commercial capture of newsrooms. Ethical credibility is essential for transforming information into civic pressure rather than polarised debate.

Third, **institutional responsiveness** requires deliberate alignment between media exposure and enforcement mechanisms. Governance institutions should establish transparent procedures for responding to credible media reports, including timely investigations and public communication of outcomes. Protecting journalists from intimidation is critical to sustaining this accountability loop.

Consistent with the MGAT framework, these interventions should be pursued in an integrated manner. Media reform initiatives that focus solely on press freedom without parallel investment in ethics and institutional enforcement risk producing visibility without accountability. Aligning all three pillars offers the most viable pathway toward durable, media-driven governance reform.

Data Availability Statement

This study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data and documentary sources cited in the manuscript. No primary dataset was generated for this study.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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