

THE EFFECT OF MEDIA ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Archaeology is fundamentally concerned with the recovery, documentation, and interpretation of material remains that illuminate past human behaviour and cultural development. Despite its scholarly and socio-economic relevance, archaeological research in Nigeria continues to experience limited visibility, inadequate funding, and weak public engagement. Media platforms have the potential to bridge this gap by facilitating knowledge dissemination, shaping public perception, and promoting heritage awareness. This study examines the role and influence of media in archaeological research and communication in Nigeria, with particular attention to both traditional and modern media channels. Using documentary analysis and ethnographic observation, the research evaluates how archaeological information is represented across television, radio, newspapers, and digital media platforms. Findings indicate that archaeological issues receive minimal media coverage and are often subsumed under broader cultural or tourism reporting, resulting in low public awareness of archaeological heritage and research outcomes. Furthermore, structural challenges such as limited specialist journalism, infrastructural constraints, and weak collaboration between archaeologists and media practitioners contribute to this gap. The study argues that improved media engagement can enhance heritage preservation, stimulate public participation, and support national identity formation. Consequently, the paper recommends strategic partnerships between archaeologists and media institutions, increased use of digital platforms for public archaeology, and policy interventions aimed at strengthening heritage communication in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: Archaeology, Media, Public archaeology, and Heritage communication.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology plays a critical role in reconstructing human history through the systematic study of material culture, including artefacts, features, and eco-facts recovered from archaeological contexts. Beyond its academic contributions, archaeology supports heritage management, identity construction, tourism development, and national consciousness. However, in many developing countries, including Nigeria, archaeological research remains largely confined to academic

circles, limiting its societal impact. One major factor contributing to this disconnect is inadequate communication between archaeologists and the broader public.

Media platforms constitute essential tools for public engagement, information dissemination, and knowledge construction. They provide channels through which scientific findings can be translated into accessible narratives, thereby enhancing public understanding of complex disciplines such as archaeology. Media engagement also enables participatory knowledge production, allowing diverse stakeholders to interact with archaeological interpretations and heritage discourse. Scholars have emphasized that media environments shape not only what is communicated but also how knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and valued within society (Howard and Parks, 2012; Huvila, 2012).

The emergence of digital technologies and social media such as museum social media pages, heritage campaigns, and digital archaeological projects has further transformed the communication landscape, offering archaeologists opportunities for real-time dissemination, interactive engagement, and collaborative knowledge production. Nevertheless, these opportunities are accompanied by challenges, including misrepresentation, sensationalism, and uneven access to digital infrastructure. In Nigeria, these challenges are compounded by structural constraints such as limited funding for heritage institutions, infrastructural deficiencies, and low prioritization of archaeological research within national development agendas.

This study, therefore, investigates the effect of media on archaeological research and public perception in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines the extent to which different media platforms represent archaeological issues, evaluates their influence on public understanding of archaeology, and explores the implications for heritage preservation and nation-building. By situating archaeology within broader communication frameworks, the study contributes to discussions on public archaeology and heritage communication in developing contexts.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Public archaeology emphasizes the interaction between archaeologists and society, highlighting the need for inclusive dissemination of archaeological knowledge. Effective communication is central to this process, as it enhances transparency, fosters community participation, and supports heritage stewardship. Media platforms, therefore, function as mediators between archaeological knowledge producers and diverse audiences.

Research indicates that media representations significantly influence public perceptions of archaeology, often shaping expectations regarding excavation practices, heritage value, and historical narratives. While popular media can stimulate interest in archaeology, it may also promote simplified or sensationalized portrayals that distort scholarly interpretations. Consequently, balanced and accurate communication strategies are essential for promoting informed public engagement. Media can be conceptualized as an information infrastructure that structures knowledge production, dissemination, and consumption. Infrastructure studies highlight how communication

technologies influence access to information and the formation of knowledge boundaries (Bowker and Star, 2000). Similarly, critical media theory underscores the role of digital technologies in shaping cultural representation and participatory communication (Manovich, 2001).

Within archaeological contexts, media infrastructures determine the visibility of research outputs and influence public discourse on heritage. Traditional media platforms such as television, radio, and print journalism have historically served as primary channels for heritage communication. However, the rapid expansion of digital media has transformed these dynamics by enabling decentralized communication and user-generated content.

The African traditional communication system represents indigenous modes of information dissemination rooted in cultural practices, symbols, and social structures. These systems include oral traditions, festivals, storytelling, music, proverbs, and symbolic signalling methods such as drums and town criers. Unlike modern mass media, traditional communication systems are characterized by face-to-face interaction, communal participation, and contextual relevance. Scholars have argued that traditional communication systems possess high credibility due to their embeddedness within community structures and cultural norms (Ugboajah, 1972; Wilson and Unoh, 1991). They also facilitate feedback mechanisms and participatory communication, thereby supporting social cohesion and knowledge continuity. In many rural African communities, these systems continue to complement modern media by addressing linguistic, literacy, and infrastructural limitations.

From an archaeological perspective, traditional communication systems play a dual role. First, they function as channels for disseminating archaeological information within local communities. Second, they serve as sources of ethnographic data that inform archaeological interpretation, particularly in relation to oral histories and indigenous knowledge systems.

Modern media platforms in Nigeria encompass print journalism, broadcasting, and digital media. These platforms have the capacity to enhance archaeological visibility, promote heritage tourism, and foster public education. However, existing evidence suggests that archaeological issues receive limited coverage in Nigerian media, often overshadowed by political, economic, and entertainment content. When archaeological topics are reported, they are frequently framed within broader cultural or tourism narratives rather than presented as distinct research domains. This trend contributes to limited public awareness of archaeological methods, research findings, and heritage preservation challenges. Furthermore, infrastructural constraints such as irregular electricity supply, digital divide, and limited specialist journalism restrict the effective dissemination of archaeological information.

Digital media platforms, including social networking sites and video-sharing platforms, offer alternative avenues for public archaeology by enabling interactive engagement and user-generated heritage narratives. Nevertheless, unequal access to digital technologies and concerns about information accuracy remain significant challenges within the Nigerian context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on media theory and public archaeology frameworks, which collectively explain how communication processes influence knowledge production, representation, and public engagement with archaeological heritage. Media theory emphasizes that communication platforms do not merely transmit information but actively shape meaning and knowledge construction. The two-step flow model highlights the role of intermediaries, such as journalists and influencers, in interpreting and disseminating specialized knowledge to wider audiences (Katz, 1957). Within archaeological contexts, media practitioners function as knowledge mediators whose framing of archaeological narratives can influence public perception and policy priorities.

Infrastructure theory further explains how communication systems create opportunities and constraints for knowledge dissemination. Information infrastructures determine accessibility, visibility, and credibility of research outputs (Bowker and Star, 2000). In Nigeria, infrastructural limitations such as uneven digital access and resource constraints affect the capacity of media platforms to effectively communicate archaeological findings.

Public archaeology theory provides a complementary perspective by emphasizing inclusive engagement between archaeologists and society. It advocates participatory dissemination strategies that enhance transparency, community involvement, and heritage stewardship. The integration of media within public archaeology, therefore, represents a critical mechanism for promoting heritage awareness and supporting sustainable preservation efforts.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design combining review of written sources and ethnographic information during field schools usually conducted by the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies of the University of Jos, Nigeria in Angware in Jos East Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. Surprisingly, most people in both communities of over 120 persons interviewed did not know about archaeology or what archaeologists do. Documentary involving the examination of media reports, such as newspapers, Facebook pages, Instagram, academic publications, and digital content related to archaeology in Nigeria, was also considered to understand the public perception of archaeology by the public. This approach enabled the identification of patterns in media representation, thematic focus, and frequency of archaeological reporting. Ethnographic observation was employed to assess public perception of archaeology and media consumption patterns. Informal interactions with community members mentioned above, such as elderly and young men and women, students of various primary and secondary schools who were on break during the field schools were randomly interviewed and enlightened on what archaeology is, and heritage stakeholders provided insights into awareness levels, attitudes toward archaeological research, and preferred communication channels.

The combination of documentary and ethnographic approaches facilitated triangulation, thereby enhancing the reliability of findings. Data were analysed thematically, focusing on representation, accessibility, engagement, and implications for heritage preservation.

DISCUSSION

Findings indicate that archaeological research receives limited and sporadic media coverage in Nigeria. When reported, archaeological activities are often framed within broader cultural heritage or tourism narratives rather than presented as scientific research endeavours. For instance, an important dimension in the discourse on cultural heritage preservation in Nigeria is the role of the media in shaping public understanding and policy direction. Evidence from leading national dailies including the Punch Newspapers, The Nation Newspaper, and The Guardian Nigeria suggests that cultural heritage is predominantly framed through the lenses of tourism, economic utility, and cultural identity, rather than as a domain of scientific inquiry.

A close reading of selected publications reveals a recurring narrative structure. Reports often highlight the economic prospects of heritage resources, emphasizing their potential contribution to national development through tourism. For example, coverage by the Punch Newspapers (August 27, 2025) situates cultural assets within a revenue-generation framework, with little attention paid to the research processes that inform their significance. Similarly, The Nation Newspaper (September 11, 2023) constructs heritage discourse around national identity formation and tourism development, reinforcing its utilitarian value. In another instance, The Guardian Nigeria (August 12, 2018) addresses institutional challenges such as underfunding of museums, yet the focus remains on preservation as a policy concern rather than a scientific undertaking. Even when references are made to archaeologists, as seen in the Punch Newspapers (October 24, 2025), the emphasis is largely on advocacy and management issues, with minimal engagement with empirical research or methodological approaches.

This pattern reflects a broader media logic characterized by accessibility, immediacy, and audience appeal. As noted by Ijeomah and Eniang (2021), heritage reporting in Nigerian newspapers is largely event-driven and descriptive, often lacking analytical depth and sustained engagement with scholarly perspectives. Such framing simplifies complex heritage processes and reduces them to consumable narratives centred on festivals, monuments, and tourism potential.

The dominance of this approach has several implications. First, it limits public awareness of the scientific dimensions of cultural heritage, including archaeological investigation, conservation techniques, and heritage documentation. Second, it contributes to a narrow valuation of heritage resources, where their worth is measured primarily in economic or symbolic terms. Third, it may inadvertently weaken advocacy for research funding, as the scientific contributions of heritage studies remain underrepresented in public discourse.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the media's emphasis on tourism and cultural identity is partly shaped by priorities for national development. In a context where economic diversification is a key policy objective, framing heritage as a viable economic sector aligns with broader governmental agendas. However, a more balanced representation that integrates scientific perspectives would enhance public understanding and support more sustainable heritage management practices.

This pattern reduces public understanding of archaeological methods, research significance, and heritage management challenges. Media prioritization of political and entertainment content contributes to the marginalization of archaeological reporting. Additionally, the absence of specialized heritage journalism limits the accuracy and depth of archaeological narratives presented to the public. Consequently, media representations may oversimplify archaeological findings or emphasize sensational aspects of discoveries.

Traditional Communication Systems and Archaeological Awareness

Traditional communication systems remain influential within many Nigerian communities, particularly in rural areas. These systems facilitate culturally relevant and participatory dissemination of information through oral traditions, festivals, and symbolic communication. Their credibility and accessibility make them valuable channels for communicating archaeological knowledge and promoting heritage awareness.

Media, Archaeology, and Heritage Preservation

Media engagement has significant implications for heritage preservation. Effective communication can increase public awareness of heritage value, encourage community stewardship, and support policy advocacy for heritage protection. Conversely, inadequate media representation may contribute to heritage neglect, looting, and destruction due to limited public appreciation of archaeological significance. The study highlights the need for strategic collaboration between archaeologists and media practitioners to enhance the accuracy, visibility, and impact of archaeological communication. Training initiatives and institutional partnerships can strengthen heritage journalism and promote informed public discourse.

Implications for Nation Building and Development

Archaeological heritage contributes to national identity formation, tourism development, and educational advancement. Media engagement enhances these contributions by promoting awareness, fostering pride in cultural heritage, and supporting economic opportunities associated with heritage tourism. Improved archaeological communication can also inform policy development, attract research funding, and strengthen cultural diplomacy. In Nigeria, where heritage resources remain underutilized, strategic media engagement represents a viable pathway for integrating archaeology into broader development frameworks.

Archaeological heritage extends far beyond scientific inquiry; it is deeply embedded in processes of nation-building, identity formation, and cultural citizenship.

In plural societies, heritage functions as a repository of collective memory that shapes socio-political solidarity and contributes to the construction of national narratives (Smith, 2015; Logan, 2012). The material remains of past societies thus become symbolic anchors through which citizens cultivate a sense of shared belonging and historical continuity.

Nationalism thrives on shared symbols and historical references that reinforce collective belonging (Anderson, 2006). Archaeological heritage provides tangible manifestations of human ingenuity and social complexity that can be mobilized to affirm narratives of antiquity, resilience, and interconnection. In the Nigerian context, archaeological landscapes such as those in Jos East and other parts of Plateau State, including ancient settlement mounds, stone tool scatters, and rock art sites, embody deep temporal connections to past lifeways (Izugbara and Ayi, 2015). When communicated through media narratives and educational platforms, these sites foster national pride by affirming the long-standing cultural dynamism of Nigerian societies.

Moreover, archaeological heritage contests monolithic or colonial-derived histories that marginalize indigenous epistemologies. Media engagement with discoveries from Plateau State disrupts reductive portrayals of African pasts and foregrounds endogenous achievements in technology, agriculture, and social organization (Haour, 2013). Through such heritage narratives, citizens are encouraged to situate present identity within an expansive and multifaceted historical horizon, a process foundational to inclusive forms of nationalism.

Cultural memory is socially negotiated and institutionally mediated; it shapes how societies remember, interpret, and value their past (Assmann, 2011). Archaeological sites and artefacts serve as mnemonic devices that anchor public recollection, offering visible evidence that supplements oral traditions and historical texts. In Plateau State, the rock engravings and settlement remain not only provide archaeological data but also resonate with local communities' stories of origin and ancestral continuity (Okpoko, 2018). When these heritage assets are foregrounded in journalism, documentary media, and school curricula, they contribute to shared narratives that reinforce collective memory.

The role of media in shaping cultural memory cannot be overstated. Through digital storytelling, broadcast documentaries, and social media discourse, archaeological interpretations enter public consciousness and mediate community-wide remembrance (Chirikure and Pwiti, 2018). However, the framing and selectivity of media narratives determine whether this process reinforces inclusive identity frameworks or entrenches exclusionary tropes. Responsible reporting that amplifies multiple heritage voices, including those of minority groups linked to Jos East archaeological landscapes, strengthens intercultural empathy and broadens national identity beyond narrow ethnonationalist paradigms.

Identity construction, too, is grounded in the narratives people use to situate themselves within history (Hall, 1996). Material culture from Jos East, when presented within media platforms, becomes a source of pride and local empowerment, validating community histories that may have been marginalized in national discourse. For example, archaeological projects uncovering prehistoric occupation levels in Plateau

sites have stimulated local interest in heritage preservation, providing communities with visible markers of their deep historical roots (Abraham, 2020).

The intertwining of heritage, memory, and identity has practical implications for development. A populace that appreciates its archaeological past is more likely to advocate for heritage protection, invest in site-based tourism, and support educational programs that integrate local histories. In Plateau State, community-led initiatives to document and protect rock art and settlement features have catalysed tourism interest and stimulated local economies while promoting sustainable heritage stewardship.

Importantly, the promotion of archaeological heritage through media and educational channels can enhance historical literacy and civic participation. When citizens engage with narratives that reflect diversity and shared experiences, social cohesion is strengthened, an essential component of democratic development (Barkan, 2017). Accordingly, strategic media engagement in heritage communication should prioritize accuracy, inclusivity, and contextual nuance to support nation-building that is both socially cohesive and developmentally relevant.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the effect of media on archaeological research and public perception in Nigeria. Findings reveal that archaeological issues receive limited media coverage, resulting in low public awareness and weak engagement with heritage preservation. Structural challenges, including infrastructural limitations and the absence of specialized heritage journalism, further constrain effective communication. Nevertheless, both traditional and modern media platforms offer significant opportunities for enhancing archaeological outreach. Integrating these communication channels within public archaeology frameworks can promote inclusive dissemination, strengthen heritage stewardship, and support national development objectives. The following recommendations are made:

1. Strengthening collaboration between archaeologists and media practitioners to improve accuracy and frequency of archaeological reporting.
2. Promoting heritage journalism through training and institutional support.
3. Utilizing digital media platforms for interactive public archaeology initiatives.
4. Integrating traditional communication systems into archaeological outreach strategies.
5. Encouraging policy interventions that prioritize heritage communication and preservation.
6. Enhancing public education programs aimed at improving archaeological awareness.

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