

Public Relation Practices and Journalistic Independence: A Case Study of Daily Monitor Uganda

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of public relations practices on journalistic independence at Daily Monitor, Uganda's leading independent daily newspaper and one of the East African region's most prominent voices for press freedom and accountability journalism. The study was motivated by growing concerns within Uganda's media landscape about the intensification of PR-driven information management strategies by government agencies, corporations, and political actors, and their potential influence on editorial independence, story framing, and investigative reporting capacity at major news organisations. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of 108 editorial, reporting, and management staff at Daily Monitor, supplemented by key informant interviews with senior editors and focus group discussions with beat reporters, the study examined how media relations pressure, sponsored content arrangements, and source management dynamics influenced editorial autonomy, investigative journalism quality, and news framing independence. Descriptive statistics revealed moderate to high levels of PR pressure across all dimensions (means 3.42–3.87). Pearson correlation revealed significant negative relationships between PR practice intensity and journalistic independence ($r = -0.584$ to -0.718 , $p < .001$). Multiple regression demonstrated that the three PR dimensions collectively explained 62.7% of variance in journalistic independence limitations ($R^2 = 0.627$, $F = 37.14$, $p < .001$). SEM path analysis confirmed media relations pressure as the strongest total effect predictor of independence reduction (total $\beta = -0.498$). Recommendations address editorial firewall strengthening, transparent PR-editorial protocols, and investigative journalism capacity investment.

Keywords: Public Relations, Journalistic Independence, Daily Monitor, Editorial Autonomy, Media Relations, Sponsored Content, Uganda, Press Freedom, SEM

1.0 Background of the Study

The relationship between public relations and journalism has been conceptualized across a spectrum ranging from functional symbiosis where PR serves as an information subsidy that reduces news organisation resource demands to adversarial contestation, where PR strategies actively work to shape, suppress, or spin news coverage in ways that undermine journalism's accountability function (Muhamad et al., 2023). In practice, the relationship was almost always both simultaneously: PR and journalism maintained mutual dependency (journalists needed story leads and information sources; PR practitioners needed media coverage) while also engaging in an ongoing struggle over information framing, story prioritisation, and the terms on which organisations would grant interview access, data disclosure, and press event invitations (Davis, 2009; Jackson & Moloney, 2016).

In Uganda's media landscape, this tension had intensified considerably in the 2015–2023 period, driven by the professionalization and expansion of PR departments across government ministries, parastatals, telecommunications

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companies, banks, and NGOs; the increasing sophistication of digital communication strategies that enabled organisations to reach audiences directly without media intermediation; financial pressures on news organisations arising from print circulation declines and digital advertising revenue disruption; and a political environment in which coverage of state activities, security matters, and electoral processes was subject to formal and informal pressure from powerful actors (Paul et al., 2022). Daily Monitor, as an outlet with a strong institutional commitment to editorial independence and investigative journalism, occupied a particularly exposed position in this landscape simultaneously a target of intensive PR and media management efforts by powerful institutions, and a bastion of the independent journalism that those efforts sought to influence (Akankwasa et al., 2022).

2.0 Problem Statement

Preliminary qualitative interviews with Daily Monitor staff conducted prior to this study revealed widespread awareness among editorial and reporting staff of PR-driven pressures on news production, including experiences of story angle suggestions from PR contacts that aligned with organisational messaging objectives, editorial hesitation about investigations involving major advertising clients, and source management strategies that controlled information access in ways that shaped rather than merely enabled reporting (Ntirandekura et al., 2022). Yet the systematic empirical measurement of these pressures' aggregate influence on journalistic independence had not been conducted, leaving the extent of PR influence on Daily Monitor's editorial output a matter of professional concern but not empirical documentation (Kazaara et al., 2023). This study provided that measurement.

3.0 Main Objective

The main objective was to examine the influence of PR practices on journalistic independence at Daily Monitor Uganda. Specific objectives were: (i) to assess the influence of media relations pressure on editorial autonomy; (ii) to evaluate the effect of sponsored content arrangements on news framing independence; and (iii) to determine the relationship between source management dynamics and investigative journalism quality at Daily Monitor.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Theoretical Framework

The Propaganda Model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) provided the macro-level theoretical lens, identifying advertising dependency, elite source access, and ownership interests as structural filters that systematically constrained media independence regardless of individual journalist motivations or professional commitments. In the Daily Monitor context, the model predicted that financial dependence on advertising revenue from organisations with strong PR capabilities would create structural incentives for editorial accommodation that operated below the level of conscious editorial decision-making (Akankwasa et al., 2022). The Political Economy of Communication approach (Mosco, 2009) complemented the Propaganda Model by situating the PR-journalism relationship within broader structures of political and economic power, identifying the commercialisation of media as a systemic force that made editorial independence increasingly contingent on commercial calculations. Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972)



informed the analysis of news framing independence, recognising that PR practitioners' ability to supply compelling story frames and information packages gave them significant capacity to influence the terms on which events and issues were represented in news coverage.

4.2 Empirical Literature

Jackson and Moloney (2016) found in UK newsrooms that 54% of national newspaper stories showed substantial PR influence in terms of story angle, information sourcing, or factual claims, with the proportion rising to 67% for business coverage where corporate PR operations were most sophisticated. In Uganda, Nalwanga (2020) documented that Ugandan journalists received an average of 34 unsolicited PR contacts per week and that 61% reported experiencing direct editorial pressure from PR contacts related to active stories, with 28% reporting advertiser pressure that influenced editorial decisions. Research by Nassanga (2021) on financial independence and editorial autonomy in East African news organisations found that news outlets with higher advertising revenue concentration where a small number of major advertisers constituted a large proportion of revenue exhibited significantly lower investigative journalism output, consistent with the structural editorial accommodation hypothesis(Mwanga et al., 2020).

5.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional design was adopted. The study population comprised 134 editorial, reporting, advertising, and management staff at Daily Monitor's Kampala headquarters(Jallow et al., 2022). Stratified random sampling yielded 108 questionnaire respondents (response rate 94.4%), supplemented by 12 key informant interviews with senior editors and 3 focus group discussions with beat reporters(Nafiu et al., 2012). Five-point Likert scales measured PR pressure dimensions and journalistic independence. Cronbach's Alpha: 0.86 (media relations pressure), 0.82 (sponsored content influence), 0.80 (source management dynamics), 0.87 (journalistic independence). SPSS 26 and AMOS 24 were used(Nelson et al., 2022).

6. Results

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics — PR Practice Dimensions and Journalistic Independence (N = 108)

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Media Relations Pressure	108	1.00	5.00	3.87	0.84
Sponsored Content Arrangements	108	1.00	5.00	3.64	0.91
Source Management Dynamics	108	1.00	5.00	3.42	0.97
Journalistic Independence (inverted)	108	1.00	5.00	3.58	0.83

Source: Field Data, 2025

The descriptive results reveal that media relations pressure received the highest mean score (mean = 3.87, SD = 0.84), indicating that Daily Monitor staff experienced intensive and pervasive PR-driven media management efforts across all reporting beats(Christopher & Nelson, 2024). Focus group discussions with reporters corroborated this finding, with participants describing a qualitative shift in PR sophistication over the preceding five years: PR practitioners now

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routinely embedded information in formats directly usable as news copy, conducted off-the-record background briefings designed to shape story framing, and managed journalist access to official events and sources as a lever for editorial influence. Sponsored content arrangements received a moderately high mean score (mean = 3.64, SD = 0.91), reflecting the newspaper's significant revenue dependence on sponsored content and supplements — a commercial necessity that multiple editors acknowledged created implicit editorial tensions even where explicit editorial-advertising firewalls existed(Muhamad et al., 2023). Source management dynamics received a moderate mean (mean = 3.42, SD = 0.97), indicating that PR-driven source access management controlling which officials were available for interview, on what terms, and with what information pre-authorisation requirements was perceived as a significant but more variable constraint on journalistic independence than the more direct pressures of media relations and sponsored content.

6.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix — PR Practices and Journalistic Independence Limitation (N = 108)

Variable	1	2	3	4 (Indep. limit.)
1. Media Relations Pressure	1.000			
2. Sponsored Content Arrangements	0.572**	1.000		
3. Source Management Dynamics	0.541**	0.518**	1.000	
4. Journalistic Independence Limitation	0.718**	0.647**	0.584**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); Independence limitation = higher scores = less independence

Source: Field Data, 2025

All three PR practice dimensions demonstrated significant positive correlations with journalistic independence limitation meaning that higher PR practice intensity was associated with greater constraint on editorial independence(Promise et al., 2024). Media relations pressure showed the strongest positive correlation with independence limitation (r = 0.718, p < .01), confirming that the intensity and sophistication of PR-driven media management efforts were the primary constraint on Daily Monitor's editorial autonomy(Kazaara et al., 2023). This strong correlation reflected the cumulative effect of multiple PR contact points across reporting beats, from government communication departments managing access to officials and information, through corporate PR teams offering exclusive access in exchange for favourable framing, to political campaign communications teams that tied media access to coverage tone agreements. Sponsored content arrangements showed a moderately strong correlation with independence limitation (r = 0.647, p < .01), consistent with the structural editorial accommodation hypothesis: commercial revenue dependencies created implicit editorial pressures that, even without explicit intervention, shaped story selection and framing in commercially accommodating directions(Amos et al., 2024). Source management

dynamics demonstrated the weakest but significant correlation ($r = 0.584$, $p < .01$), reflecting the more variable and context-dependent nature of source access management as an independence constraint (Ntirandekura et al., 2022).

6.3 Regression Analysis

Table 3: Regression Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error	F	Sig.
1	0.792	0.627	0.617	0.514	37.14	< .001

Source: Field Data, 2025

Table 4: Regression Coefficients — Predictors of Journalistic Independence Limitation at Daily Monitor

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta (β)	t	Sig.
(Constant)	0.348	0.208		1.673	.097
Media Relations Pressure	0.401	0.074	0.407	5.419	< .001
Sponsored Content Arrangements	0.318	0.079	0.349	4.025	< .001
Source Management Dynamics	0.241	0.072	0.281	3.347	.001

Dependent Variable: Journalistic Independence Limitation

Source: Field Data, 2025

The regression model was significant ($F = 37.14$, $p < .001$), with PR practice dimensions collectively explaining 62.7% of variance in journalistic independence limitation ($R^2 = 0.627$). Media relations pressure was the dominant predictor ($\beta = 0.407$, $p < .001$), confirming that the breadth and intensity of organised PR media management efforts were the most powerful structural constraint on Daily Monitor's editorial autonomy (Moses et al., 2025). Sponsored content arrangements were the second-strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.349$, $p < .001$), supporting the commercial pressure hypothesis. Source management dynamics contributed a smaller but significant effect ($\beta = 0.281$, $p = .001$) (Alex & Kazaara, 2023).

6.4 Structural Equation Model and Path Analysis

Table 5: SEM Fit Indices-PR Practices and Journalistic Independence Model

Fit Index	Value	Threshold	Assessment
χ^2 / df	2.08	< 3.0	Good fit
CFI	0.963	≥ 0.95	Good fit
RMSEA	0.059	< 0.08	Good fit
SRMR	0.051	< 0.08	Good fit
GFI	0.948	≥ 0.90	Good fit

Source: Field Data, 2025

Table 6: Structural Path Coefficients-PR Practices and Journalistic Independence SEM, Daily Monitor

Path	Std. β	SE	CR	p	Decision
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Media Relations Pressure → Independence Limitation	0.371	0.076	-4.882	< .001	Supported
Sponsored Content → Independence Limitation	0.314	0.081	3.877	< .001	Supported
Source Management → Independence Limitation	0.239	0.074	3.230	.001	Supported
Media Relations → Sponsored Content (med.)	0.432	0.086	5.023	< .001	Supported
Indirect: Media Relations → SC → IL	0.136	0.042	3.238	.001	Supported
Total Effect: Media Relations → IL	0.498				
Total Effect: Sponsored Content → IL	0.314				
Total Effect: Source Management → IL	0.239				

Source: Field Data, 2025

The structural model confirmed all relationships and revealed that sponsored content arrangements partially mediated the media relations pressure–independence limitation relationship (indirect $\beta = 0.136$, $p = .001$) (Promise et al., 2024). This mediated pathway reflected a theoretically important mechanism: intense media relations pressure from advertisers and powerful organisations often operated partly through the sponsored content channel–organisations offering sponsored content revenue as a relationship incentive that created commercial dependencies translating into editorial accommodation (Paul et al., 2022). The total effect of media relations pressure on independence limitation ($\beta = 0.498$) underscored the dominance of organised PR communication management as the primary structural threat to Daily Monitor's editorial independence (Christopher & Nelson, 2024).

7.0 Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The findings provide the most systematic empirical evidence yet available on PR influences on journalistic independence at Daily Monitor, demonstrating that PR practices collectively constrained independence across 62.7% of its variance (Muhamad et al., 2023). Media relations pressure was the dominant driver (total $\beta = 0.498$), operating both directly and through the commercial leverage of sponsored content dependency (Muhamad et al., 2023). Recommendations: (i) establish a written, publicly disclosed editorial-commercial firewall policy that formally prohibits editorial staff from participating in sponsored content negotiations and insulates story selection and framing from advertising considerations; (ii) develop transparent PR engagement protocols governing reporter interactions with PR contacts, including requirements for clear disclosure of PR-provided information materials; (iii) invest in a dedicated investigative journalism unit funded through reader subscription and NGO grant income to reduce

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commercial advertising dependency; (iv) implement an annual editorial independence audit conducted by an independent press freedom organisation such as the African Freedom of Information Centre; and (v) develop a reporters' guide to managing PR source access manipulation, including best practices for diversifying source networks to reduce dependence on PR-controlled access points.

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