

Threats to Media Freedom and the Safety of Journalists in Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the enormous prevalence of threats to media freedom and the safety of Nigerian journalists. The goals of the study were to identify and investigate various threats to media freedom and safety of journalists in Nigeria, examine media freedom as it is defined in Nigeria's Constitution and propose potential strategies to protect Nigerian journalists from future threats. Hinged on the Authoritarian and Social Responsibility theories from the Normative theories of the press, the study used a qualitative research method in which thirty (30) journalists were purposefully chosen to participate in a Focused Group Discussion. Findings revealed that various threats to media freedom and journalists' safety accounted for the ordeals of some journalists based on the paradoxical nature of the Nigerian constitution with regard to media freedom. Based on the findings, the researchers recommended mitigation and protection measures such as the need to intentionally strengthen provisions of the constitution of Nigeria to protect journalists and media outlets from threats. In addition, legislation to punish violations of media freedom, free operation of media regulatory agencies, and the establishment of an intervention strategy or compensation scheme for journalists who are victims were similarly recommended.

Keywords: Media Freedom, Freedom of Speech, Journalism, Safety of Journalists, Nigeria

Introduction

Despite growing global efforts, the concept of the freedom of the media is waning around the world. Over the years, a number of attacks against the physical safety of journalists and media practitioners have continued to affect their capacity to freely disseminate information. Other forms of threat have been the denial of access to information, prosecution, harassment, assault, threats of arrests, and imprisonment

all of which have dampened the vital role that journalists occupy in society. Every year, the third day in May is dedicated to commemorating World Press Freedom Day by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). According to the UNESCO General Conference recommendation in December 1993, this is aimed at reminding state actors of the need to be more committed to Press freedom globally, protect the media from assaults, and honor journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession. In spite of all these, there continue to be a growing hostile attitude against the media. This is evident from the statistics released by UNESCO on the global and regional trends in the killing of journalists between 2016 and 2020; the report positioned Nigeria among the countries where journalists operate with risks. Also, World Press Freedom Index ranked Nigeria 120 out of the countries with challenges to press freedom.

In Nigeria, right from the colonial era down to the present democracy, Akinwale (2004) noted that government and individuals have been very repressive to journalism practice. Similarly, Raufu (2003) also asserted that one way by which the government interferes in the performance of the media profession is by the suppression of unfavorable reports of the media through press censorship. In 2021, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) instructed all media outfits in Nigeria to downplay the worsening security situation in Nigeria. This instruction restricted the media from relaying information to the society freely. This practice totally negates the media fundamental rights enshrined in the Nigeria Constitution which ought to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people. However, restrictions on press freedom are obvious and deteriorating in Nigeria as many journalists have greatly suffered different kinds of humiliations, intimidations, injustices, and repression in the line of duty (Adelakun, Ademuyiwa & Oyebode, 2021). Onwubere (2013) recounts that notable Nigerian journalists and newspaper owners were in the past jailed and fined huge amounts of money because of the view they expressed or published.

According to section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended), the law empowers everyone with the right to hold opinions and express them freely. Similarly, section 22 of the constitution of Nigeria allows the media to be free by holding government responsible. Asemah (2020) opines that the role of the media is that of a watchdog, but Raufu (2003) argues that section 22 of the constitution of Nigeria is not explicit enough to make media function either as watchdog or as the fourth estate of the realm to the government because this section limits the power of the media.

Hence, the media is positioned as the fourth estate of the realm to serve as a link between the government and society. This function makes the media to encounter several trials and tribulations as the relationship between the press and government in Nigeria has often been antagonistic. Therefore, the aim of this study is to establish what personal threats journalists and media organisations in Nigeria face in the course of exercising the freedom granted them in the 1999 Constitution.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Examine the nature of various threats to media freedom and the safety of journalists in Nigeria.
2. Determine the impact of suppression on journalism profession in Nigeria.
3. Find out the most effective strategies to protect Nigerian journalists from further threats.

Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on Authoritarian Media Theory and Social Responsibility Media Theory.

Authoritarian Media Theory

This theory which was formulated by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm in 1956 is the oldest press theory that explains absolute power being vested in Monarch to determine press operation. The theory emerged in England from the philosophy of absolute power of the monarch (Raufu 2003). In this theory, it is believed that truth is centered on power. That is, it is only those who have power that know the truth. Asemah (2020) posits that authoritarian theory came as a result of the belief that human beings are irrational in thinking and are not intelligent; hence, the need to be guided and controlled. The theory considers the Government as important to determine and control information to be relayed to the public. Wojcieszak, Nisbet & Kremer (2018) describe how the Government sets the standards of a mode of operation for media practitioners while the press is subjected to favor the ruling class. Hence, this theory is applicable to the study because the study looks at threats to media freedom and the safety of journalists as explained above for authoritarian theory.

Social Responsibility Media Theory

This theory came in the middle of the 20th century and emerged due to the abuse of press freedom which they enjoyed as a result of the free press. Raufu (2003) stresses

that the theory emanated from the shortfalls of the libertarian theory which failed to distinguish between liberty and abuse of liberty. In a free press regime, there is supposed to be a flow of objective information that will allow citizens to make intelligent political decisions and other decisions affecting their lives but the press abused these privileges. Thus, this theory, according to Uzuegbunam, (2015) explains freedom of the press but places responsibility on the media practitioners to abide by certain social standards. This theory is equally relevant as it allows media freedom and encourages the safety of journalists with a caution that journalists must act responsibly in the discharge of their duties (Asemah, 2020).

Literature Review

The Role of Media in the Society

The role of media in the society cannot be underestimated; Mehraj, Bhat & Rameez (2014) view media as a reflection of society to inform the people, educate the public and entertain society. While some claim that media have not performed well in society, Asemah (2020) avers that media add so much to the development of society because every section of media from print, and electronics to the web, plays a major role in bringing society to the limelight with happenings in and around the world. Asemah (2020), in listing out the roles of media in society did note that the media are major agents in “*socialising institution*” and helping cultural promotion in society. Citizens get abreast with their culture, language, ethics, and value systems through media activities. The cultural heritage and lifestyle of people in society are learned and passed from generation to generation through the efforts of the media (Nwaolikpe, 2013). Daramola (2007) & Arias (2019) add that the media communicates the norms, customs, and values of a society meaning that the media supports teaching the citizens of a society how to live, how to behave, and what is expected of them through various media programs. Similarly in 2017, Siddique & Rahman in an article titled Watchdog Role of the Media stressed that the media plays a pivotal role in making democracy work. This is further justified by Pratiyush & Kuljit (2019) who opined that the media as the fourth pillar of democracy strengthens democracy by relaying activities of government, questioning government decisions, forcing the government to implement policies, and influencing the public. Ordinarily, the media acts against injustice, oppression, and prejudice in society which Norris (2010) opines that as the watchdog of the society, the media compels those in authority to act responsibly in order to affect the common man positively; hence, the media acts as checks and balances on government activities. Raufu (2003) posits that the media functions to monitor and watch over every activity

of the government and its agencies and have the constitutional responsibility to make the government accountable for its actions (Akinwale, 2004).

Apart from the traditional functions of the media for information, education, and entertainment, Lasswell (1948), as well as Raufu (2003) describes the function of the media as surveillance of the environment, correlation of facts, the transmission of social heritage, and the molding of opinions as it relates to society. Asemah (2020) points out the surveillance function of the media involves moving around the society, taking stock of happenings in the environment and providing a report of happenings to the general public. Udeze & Chukwuma (2013) and Satnas & Kente (2020) describe the surveillance function of the media as “*eyes and ears*” of the public, stressing further that the media performs these functions to keep the public abreast of “*impending danger*” that may affect the safety of the people. Asemah (2020) posits that media creates awareness and propels positive changes where the authority and other arms of government are unable to provide quality leadership as is required. Umoru (2020) in his thought believes the surveillance function of the press is its key function yet the basis of conflicts that challenge media freedom and the safety of journalists in Nigeria.

The Constitution of Nigeria and Media Freedom Law

Globally there are provisions for ensuring media freedom for example Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) clearly provides the right to hold opinions and express them freely without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers. In consonance with UDHR 1948, section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria provides support to this provision that, everyone is eligible to freely express their views, hold opinions and receive and impart ideas and information without intrusion. In spite of this constitutional protection, the Nigerian media are subjected to numerous threats. Accounts of several threats to journalists reveal that media freedom in Nigeria is a paradox that only exists in the constitution but not in practice (Ikechukwu, 2019).

In an attempt to define media freedom, Onwubere (2013) describes press freedom and freedom of expression as “*subsets*” of freedom of information, he considers media freedom as an extension of freedom of expression. Ikechukwu (2019) then defines media freedom as the right to disseminate information freely without any forms of restriction except that limited by the constitution. This justifies what Onwubere said in 2013 that the freedom a journalist has is to perform his responsibilities without interference of any kind while maintaining that ethical principles connotes media freedom. Asemah (2020) buttresses further that sincere media freedom gives the journalists the power

to report facts faithfully irrespective of the status of the concerned individual without restraints. To this effect, individuals or groups of people including the media have the constitutional right and liberty to express themselves as provided by the constitution. However, Apuke (2016) argues that there is nowhere in the world that one can have absolute press freedom. In affirming his argument, Raufu (2003) and Asemah (2020) also support the view that there is nowhere in the world that media freedom is absolute without internal or external restriction. This implies that freedom of expression or of the press has never been absolute.

Ikechukwu (2019) points out that government is a key player against the media because the media are regulated by the government in the discharge of their duties. These regulations form barriers to press activities. Asemah (2020) observes that these regulations including sedition law, the law of defamation, and copyrights law among others served as a restriction to the powerful press. Apuke (2016) agrees further that press activities are regulated by “external and internal bodies”. Internally, media practitioners have codes of ethics that serve as barriers to the free flow of information to the public and externally by open polices.

Nature of Threats to Media Freedom

According to the Council of Europe Report DGI (2016), threats to media freedom are increasingly growing on a daily basis; as many journalists have suffered diverse threats in the past and still face numerous challenges presently all in the line of duty (Nielsen, Cornia & Kalogeropoulos, 2016). Earlier Onwubere (2013) had asserted that the repression of the press and hostile situation in Nigeria were on the increase daily. Nighat & Shmyla (2020) opine that threats to journalists’ safety have implications not only on the journalists but also has impact on the society as a whole. Acts such as intimidation, denigration, and violence against journalists have implications for freedom of expression, democratic norms, and access to information at large. Other forms of threats outlined by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press are:

I. Government Threats

One major source of threat to journalists is government itself. Ordinarily, the government is expected to uphold laws guiding press freedom by allowing the free flow of information without restrictions unfortunately, the government also has misused their power to detain or arrest journalists in an attempt to prevent them from reporting an issue or in retaliation for previous reports. One of such ways of hindering press freedom is through the use of regulatory bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to threaten media practitioners by way of license withdrawal of

a media house as a result of unfavorable news item. For instance, in October 2020, the Federal Government of Nigeria, through NBC sanctioned three media houses, AIT, Arise News and Channels Television with a fine of Three Million Naira each for alleged violation of the broadcasting code when they reported the #EndSARS protests (Akinpelu, 2021).

II. Physical Violence

There have been several accounts of assaults on the safety of journalists (Nyarko & Akpojivi, 2017). This implies that journalism practice is becoming riskier which usually involves threats to the life, career, and family of a journalist. In Nigeria during campaigns, elections, protests, and other social events, journalists may be shot or attacked and their reporting tools may be confiscated especially when the journalist refuses to bend to their unscrupulous rules. Ujene & Ojedokun (2021) assert that many cases of physical violence against journalists are recorded during general elections periods. For instance, during the 2019 general elections, a journalist, Reginald Dei, a Bayelsa Government House photographer, was killed while waiting for the Presidential and National Assembly election results. Also, in 2017 during the protest organised by 'Our Mumu Don Do' group, Amadin Uyi of Silverbird Television, Abuja was reported to have been brutalised by police officers (Akinpelu, 2021).

Joint security forces consisting of the Army, Department of State Security Service, and the Police invaded Media Trust Limited, publishers of *Daily Trust Newspapers*, premises on Sunday, 6 January, 2019. Its two offices situated at Maiduguri and Lagos were also invaded by the security forces on the same day.

Kofi Bartels, a broadcast journalist with Nigeria Info 92.3 FM, a Port-Harcourt-based radio station on 4 June 2019 was arrested, detained, and tortured by the officials of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigeria Police for trying to cover policemen torturing a teenager in Port-Harcourt.

III. Harassments

Article 19, an organisation that speaks up for the freedom of the press, notes that harassment of journalists is on the increase. The culprits of violence, threats, and assaults are government authorities, criminal gangs, individuals, co-workers, bosses, sources, and subjects. Published on their website, Article 19 reports that in 2020, 51 crimes were recorded against a total of 60 journalists documented from January to October 2020. The journalists face both online and offline threats to their physical safety, integrity, and families (Article 19, 2020).

One of such records relates to A *Daily Post* editor, Wale Odunsi, who was harassed by security officials at Kogi State Government House on 11 October 2019 (Premium Times, 2019). In the same year, Premium Times reported that the Abia State Chapter of The Nigerian Union of Journalists secretariat was invaded by military personnel during Operation Python Dance and a number of journalists were harassed.

IV. Denial of Access

Any erring media house or journalist that fails to do the wish of the government or reports contrary to their wish is tactically denied access to documents or information (Apuke, 2016). In Nigeria, there have been several accounts of journalists being denied access to functions like court proceedings, public meetings, press conferences, and government functions. In 2017, Premium Times reported that the State House correspondent of Punch Newspaper, Lekan Adetayo, was expelled from the Aso Rock Villa by the Chief Security Officer (CSO) to President Muhammadu Buhari over a story his paper published about the state of health of the President (Tukur, 2017).

V. Legal intimidation

Many news outlets and journalists are at risk of lawsuits due to the nature of their jobs. Many of these legal actions do not have any merit but are used to intimidate and silence journalists. In 2015, the All Progressive Congress (APC) presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari threatened to file a lawsuit against Daar Communications, owner of African Independent Television (AIT) and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) for airing what was termed hate broadcasts against his personality. That year, Premium Times reported that the former Lagos State Governor, Senator Bola Tinubu threatened a lawsuit against the same media organisation over what he described as defamatory content.

Factors Militating Against Press Freedom in Nigeria

From the nature of threats to media freedom outlined above, there is no doubt, that the media perform their duties in a less conducive environment. A Media Development Investment fund (2019) report asserts that a free media is important to the growth and development of any society and as Norris (2010) describes it, the media as a watchdog of the society and fourth estate of the realm, is obliged to monitor governance thoroughly and make public office holders accountable to the people who elected them as required by the constitution. Given the appropriate situation, the media are major players in the general strategy to promote good governance, rule of law, ensure probity and accountability, wipe out illiteracy and eradicate poverty. Apart from the nature of

threats, there are other factors militating against the media to perform their rightful roles as enshrined in section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. These factors are legal pressure, economic and political pressure, confidentiality clause and direct censorship and force and are discussed below:

i. Legal Pressure:

In spite of the backing of the constitution for media freedom, there are limits from several angles which are tactically and legally introduced to restrain absolute media freedom (Asemah 2020). Constitutional provision for press freedom according to Nwodu (2006) has a superior clause. Section 45 of the Constitution of Nigeria limits the power of media freedom in Section 39 (1); it abrogates all the rights and gives constitutional backing to all laws made in the interest of national security, public safety, and public morality. Subsection (2) of section 39 of the Constitution of Nigeria also hinders the free flow of information especially ownership of media outlets by authorizing the government to oversee the fulfillment of conditions laid down. Section 22 also saddles the media with a great task although there is no substantial legal backing to execute it.

Asemah (2020) observes that the media are not allowed to report any story perceived to endanger national security; consequently, any erring journalist involved in such activities will be "*charged with treason, espionage or violation*". In most cases, the government uses this as a way to frustrate the right to media freedom. In all, media freedom in Nigeria only exists in the constitution but not in practice (Akupe, 2017) Amnesty International (2015) narrates how Gloria Mabeiam Ballason, an on-air personality was harassed. As a lawyer and columnist for Blue Print Newspaper and Chief Executive Officer of House of Justice, a non-profit organization in Kaduna State, Gloria was harassed by the Governor of Kaduna State when she was publicly declared a security threat to the state with the promise that she would be arrested and prosecuted her for her reports.

Similarly, Obinna Don Norman, an investigative journalist and owner of The Realm News, an online news medium in Lagos, was accused of cyberstalking for exposing corruption. He was arrested by the Police during a talk show at a local radio station in Umuahia, Abia State, South-East Nigeria. He faced charges of cyberstalking under the Cybercrimes Act.

Another case subjugated by the law was Ohimai Amaize who was forced to escape. Formerly a journalist and presenter on the Kakaaki Social segment of the morning

show on African Independent Television (AIT), he had to flee Nigeria following alleged threats to his life. Also, his program at AIT was suspended after the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) sent warning letters to AIT.

ii. Economic and Political Pressure:

One major way media outfits succeed and prosper is through frequent advert placements in addition to opportunities from different clients especially government and political parties. Asemah (2020) posits that Government uses this to restrict and limit many media outfits that fail to favor the government in terms of reportage. Any media outfit that works favorably with the government by way of gratifying reportage gets advert placement opportunities from the government. Nwabueze, Ezebuenyi & Ezeoke (2012) admit that advertisers' influence on media content further undermines the role of the media in society. Nwodu (2006) points out that another economic reason is the denial to enjoy subsidies and other economic assistance; these acts restrict media activities and subject them to pressure with a view to pull down some perceived secret reports of government.

One incident reported was that of Jones Abiri who was arrested and detained for publishing about oil blocks in the Niger Delta. Jones was a journalist, and publisher of a local tabloid in Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, *Weekly Source* who according to reports, was said to have been arrested and detained on July 2016, by officials of the Department for Security Service (DSS). He was held for more than two years without any charge. On 15 August 2018, he was released after a Magistrate Court struck out the charges against him yet, the DSS re-arrested Jones eight months later and he was charged with cybercrime, terrorism, petroleum production and sabotage.

Jaa'far Jaa'far, an investigative journalist and Daily Nigerian editor-in-chief, for an online publication based in Abuja, was accused of defamation for exposing corruption. He was made to face charges for exposing corruption.

iii. Confidentiality Clause

Official Secret acts promulgated in 1962 and revived in 1990 are legislations made by the Government to prevent people from revealing official documents of the government to the public (Asemah, 2020). Nwodu (2006) revealed that because the government decides to disclose desired information to journalists through press conferences, any erring journalist that does anything contrary can be charged as the matter is not expected to be disclosed except after such briefing. Hence, these official secret

acts restrict press freedom and give more power to the government to decide what information to relay for public consumption.

Amnesty International (2015) gives accounts of Ahmed Salkida, an investigative journalist who dedicated his life to extensive reports on the Boko Haram activities in North-East Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin. He was arrested, harassed, and stigmatized repeatedly for refusing to disclose the sources of his investigative reporting on the Boko Haram activities. In 2016, the Nigerian Government declared him wanted after he published an article and released a proof of a live video of school girls abducted by Boko Haram from Chibok Village in North-East Nigeria on his website.

Also, Samuel Ogunidipe a reporter with a leading online medium for investigative journalism in Nigeria, *Premium Times*, was on August 2018 arrested and detained by men of the Nigeria Police for refusing to disclose his sources of an article published by *Premium Times*. The news article referred to a report on the investigation into the invasion of the National Assembly by operatives of the Department of State Services (DSS), which the then Inspector General of Police (IG), Ibrahim Idris, had submitted to the then Acting President, Prof. Yemi Osinbajo. He was later charged with 'criminal trespass' and 'theft of police document' (Okakwu & Iroanusi, 2018).

Similarly, security forces raided the premises of the *Premium Times* online newspaper in 2017. The raid was a result of a story on Nigeria's Chief of Army Staff, about some undeclared properties in Dubai which is contrary to the Nigerian Army Code of Ethics (Tukur, 2019). The article raised certain questions about the alleged actions of the chief of army staff, which, reportedly, angered him.

iv. Direct Censorship and Force

The government of Nigeria has regulatory agencies to checkmate the activities of the media thereby restricting them from freely reporting events (Asemah, 2020). These agencies are Nigeria Press Council (NPC), Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC), National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), and Media Council. Gidado (2021) notes that these agencies especially the NBC, are empowered to regulate every aspect of journalism practice in Nigeria and thereby subject media outfits and journalists to be under the control of the government. This is evident in cases where the government is reluctant to issue media licenses to those she perceives as adversaries or oppositions. In some cases, Nwodu (2006) & Apuke (2016) assert that there has been arbitrary detention of journalists, confiscation of media equipment, harassment, closure of mass media houses, and assault of journalists which confirm repression of the press.

Also, Mary Ekere, a female journalist with *The Post Newspaper*, a local tabloid based in Uyo, was assaulted by the officials of the Akwa Ibom State Environmental Protection and Waste Management Agency for covering their brutality against street traders in the city with her mobile phone on 16 September 2019.

Research Methodology

The researchers adopted the qualitative method in this study, using the focus group discussion approach to collect data from participants. The method allows the research to draw conclusions based on the participants' perspectives and experiences (Ibrahim, 2016). This is because the method proved to be the most effective to assist the researchers to unveil threats to media freedom and journalists' safety in Nigeria. A purposive sample population of 30 media practitioners was chosen from Nigeria's six geo-political zones. Each of Nigeria's 36 states is located within a geo-political zone. Having five participants from each of these zones indicate equal and perfect representativeness of the whole country in the research. This method allowed easy reach to the entire country through the geo-political zones (Okocha and Akpe, 2022). The zones are: South South, South East, South West, North Central, North East and North West.

The FGD was organised through a new media platform called Zoom with a group of six (6) participants per session. This was done for five (5) groups differently to make up thirty (30) participants for the study. For the purpose of the discussion, all the thirty (30) participants were tagged from P1 to P30 for confidentiality and easy identification of each participant.

Moderated by the researchers, the discussions during the FGD lasted for one (1) hour and all questions were thoroughly dealt with. The discussions were highly coordinated as relevant information were reviewed and documented via Zoom. Sequel to the FGD, the moderators had about three minutes of phone interview with each participant in order to get more detail and ascertain their previous views.

Data Analysis and Findings

In analyzing the data, focus was on the necessary demographic information and the already stated objectives of the study. Any additional information arising from the in-depth interview was brought under the objectives.

1. Demographic Data

As previously explained, 30 participants were sampled across the country, with five

from each of the six geo-political zones that make up Nigeria. This was to ensure that no section of the country was left out of the study because every state or citizen of Nigeria is native to any of the political zones or resides there.

Table 1 shows that out of the 30 participants, 19 were males and 11 were females. Under Geo-political zones, there is a breakdown of both male and female participants. North East and South East had the highest number of male participants while North Central had the highest number of female participants.

PROFILE	VALUES	FREQUENCY
Gender	Males	19
	Females	11
Geo-political Zones	South South	5
	North Central	5
	North East	5
	South West	5
	South East	5
	North West	5
Job Status	Newscasters	6
	Journalists	17
	Producer/Presenters	2
	Editor	3
	Freelancer	2
Age Brackets	>30	4
	30-39	17
	40-49	5
	50+	4
Media Organizations	Newspaper (Print)	10
	Television	8
	Radio	6
	Online Newspaper	4
	Others	2
Working Experiences (Years)	>5	6
	5-9	12
	10-14	10
	15+	2

Source: Field Study, 2022

As seen from the table, 17 journalists from the mainstream media, including those operating online (minus the editors), constituted the sample population. Also within the mainstream media were six newscasters and three editors. Again, out of the 30 participants, 17 of them fell within the age bracket of between 30 and 39 years while five were between 40 and 49 years. Ten participants were from the newspapers (print), eight were from the television, six from radio and four from purely online newspapers. This shows that all the different branches of the media industry relevant to the study were covered.

Also considered and stated in the tables are the work experiences of the participants in the in-depth interview and focus group discussions. Twelve of them have been in media practice for between five and nine years while 10 have practiced for between 10 and 14 years. This indicates that they are experienced and knowledgeable enough to respond to the issues raised in the interview.

2. Nature of threat to media practice in Nigeria

All the participants agreed that there are various levels of threats to press freedom in Nigeria. They describe this freedom to mean the right to freely disseminate information without restriction and the right to carry out media functions without molestation. While P22 simply defined media freedom as enjoyment of privileges attached to the media profession without restraint to practice, P4 described it as a way of propagating information, enlightening and entertaining the people, and serving as a watchdog in the society without oppression and restriction either by the government or individuals. But it is quite “unfortunate” that media are not allowed to freely practice.

Most of the participants clearly stated that even the 1999 Constitution is not without threats to press freedom which it equally guarantees. They stated that the Constitution is inconsistent and very weak with respect to media freedom. It was their opinion that while certain provisions of the Constitution permit freedom of expression and empower media to make government responsive and accountable, the same Constitution and some other laws have provisions that make such practice impossible. For instance, they cited laws that deal with defamation, invasion of privacy, publication of classified information, seditious publications, and many others. Participants observed that the right to freedom of expression and of the press provided for in Nigeria’s 1999 Constitution, section 39 (1) and (2) and section 22, comes with exceptions.

In addition to existing laws that pose threats to media freedom, participants stated other avenues of extra-legal threats posed by government, groups and individuals. They mentioned issues such as confiscation of media equipment such as cameras and tape recorders, physical threats to lives of journalists by security agents, arbitrary arrest and detentions, among others. They pointed accusing fingers at government through security personnel, show of power by political class, celebrities, and political thugs. All these, they claimed happened while journalists are performing their professional functions.

3. Impacts of the threats on Nigerian media

Participants observed that threats to the safety of journalists or whenever journalists are attacked violently, have serious implications on Nigeria's democracy. For P8, denial of access to activities of government or important information generates a lot of negative impacts especially when such information is for public good. P10 stated that some journalists have been forced to flee the country because of fear of intimidation and illegal arrest as a result of publication of stories considered by government or individuals to be unlawful. Such situations, they stated, have turned journalism into a nightmare.

4. Protection of journalists and the media from threats

All the participants were of the opinion that by its very nature, the practice of journalism makes it difficult for journalists to be completely safe and that government has not done enough to protect the interests of media practitioners. P12 declared that "media practitioners are not safe in Nigeria; they and their families are vulnerable to different attacks and hostility by government and individuals due to the sensitivity of their duties." However, 25 participants believe that the safety of journalists is achievable, if necessary mechanisms such as dealing decisively with those who attack journalists, promotion of rule of law, equity and justice in the society are put in place.

Participants stated that at present, government does not uphold the protection of journalists, instead, it acts as a major key-player against freedom of the press. P28 stated that government has a responsibility to protect journalists and ensure a conducive environment for them to practice, and that government is expected to call security forces to order so that they do not continue to treat media practitioners with hostility.

It was the view of most of the participants that media regulatory bodies in Nigeria are not independent. P4 says government uses media regulatory bodies to witch-hunt any media outlet or journalist that goes against their wish and on many occasions, their rights to practice have been endangered. P6 and P16 believe that: “media regulatory bodies in Nigeria are established to serve as puppets to government. Their legitimate aim to regulate is defeated as they work in line with government decisions because, *“He who pays the piper, dictates the tunes.”* It was her opinion that regulatory bodies are not always fair when government and journalist(s) are at loggerheads.

Generally, participants believe that if concerted efforts are made by the government and citizens, journalists would be safe to operate freely. P11 called for a constitutional amendment to accommodate a provision to punish and prosecute those who commit crimes against journalists in the line of duty to serve as a deterrent for others. P1 and P17 added that there should be a creation of a compensation scheme for fallen journalists and other media practitioners. They believed that this would create confidence among media practitioners.

Discussion of Findings

This work set out in its first objective to examine the nature of various threats to media freedom and the safety of journalists in Nigeria. Findings revealed that threats to media freedom are on the increase. This is in tune with the assertion of Onwubere (2013) that hostility towards press freedom in Nigeria is on the increase. Also, findings indicated that excessive pressure on journalists to reveal their sources of information, confiscation of media equipment, assaults, harassment, threats to the life of journalists, imprisonments, arbitrary arrest of journalists, and closure of mass media houses are some of the threats to media freedom in Nigeria. This conclusion aligns with Nwodu (2006) and Umaru (2020) on the various threats suffered by Nigerian journalists. In consonance with Gidado (2021), findings also indicated that government is a key player in repressing the press through intimidation and unfair allocation of advert placements to media outlets.

The second objective sought to ascertain the impacts of repression on journalism profession in Nigeria. Findings showed that such repressions have resulted in low reportage contents which has also led to journalists fleeing the country, among others. This is in line with Nighat & Shmyla’s (2020) position that threats to journalists’ safety have implications not only on journalists but also on the society as a whole.

The third objective was to find the most effective strategies to protect Nigeria journalists from further threats. Findings indicated that government should have workable legal protection for the media, establish a compensation scheme or social insurance trust fund for journalists that fall victim to threats, harassment, etc., and most especially, amendment and inclusion of a section of the constitution to provide punishment for those who commit crimes against journalists. It is believed that if such people are prosecuted, it would serve as a deterrent to others and consequently reduce crimes against journalists.

Conclusion

From this study, it has been established that media freedom in Nigeria and around the world has been deteriorating over the years. Repression is taking new dimensions, thereby killing the morale of media practitioners. Journalists do not feel safe to perform their duties; they are threatened, intimidated, and persecuted.

Instead of supporting the media to operate freely, governments at different levels are making concerted efforts to impede media independence and this has impacted negatively on democracy and the development of nations. This is because one key principle of democracy is freedom, which by extension, means access to authentic information through the media. It is therefore not too late to demand that press freedom, as stated in the 1999 Constitution, be granted in full.

Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, the researchers consider it important to make some recommendations:

1. In view of Section 22 and 39 (1) of the Constitution of Nigeria, it is high time for the constitution was amended to accommodate in practical terms, without any hindrance, the freedom of the press. This will allow the media to operate without fear of intimidation or harassment.
2. Media practitioners should work harmoniously with the National Human Rights Commission and Human Rights activists to promote the enforcement of stringent sanctions on culprits against journalists.
3. Concerned authorities should establish an interventionist social insurance programme or compensation scheme for media practitioners who suffer intimidation and even death while on duty.

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