

Evaluating the level of Press Freedom in Modern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In this study, press freedom in Nigeria is investigated, together with its recent developments and historical background. It looks at the state of press freedom, highlighting obstacles, worldwide forces that contribute to its restriction and the benefits it provides. Despite legislative restrictions, government control over Nigeria's media has persisted since the Newspaper Ordinance of 1903. The study places press freedom within several theoretical frameworks, such as authoritarian, libertarian, and democratic participant theories, using McQuail's theories of mass communication. Using Google Forms and the River sampling method, the study obtained data from 60 Nigerian journalists with a 100% response rate. The study underscores the critical function of press freedom in democratic nations, calls for its protection, and emphasizes its ability to influence open government, the defense of human rights, and socioeconomic progress.

Keywords: *Press, Press - freedom, Journalist, Media, Mass Communication*

1. Introduction

Throughout the world the press has always have a factor inhibiting their freedom except during the time of the libertarianism, where the press was much free based on the idea that the members of the press are ‘Rational and Ethical’ in their activities. At the end of the day, this was seen to be false after the test of time because we saw that when the press was given total freedom the journalists misused their power, libel, slander, invasion of privacy and other unethical behavior became the order of the day. In the present day, the press remains in chains; chains of the government, chains of the society, chains of the owners etc.

In Nigeria, the case is not different; the press has always been under the control of the government all the way from the establishment of the Newspaper. This establishment gave birth to the Newspaper ordinance of 1903 that showed how the media was limited in its dissemination of information. Also looking at the cases of journalist been killed and mishandled which leads to self-censorship and strict gatekeeping process. The press being the body established by the people for the people is meant to be free in order to discharge its duties as the watchdog of the democratic society, these freedom could be limited like in the social responsibly theory. It is important to note that the freedom of the press shows the level of democracy in a country.

The research work there has the following objectives to achieve at the end; To ascertain the level of press freedom in Nigeria, To identify the problems of press freedom in Nigeria, To identify the reasons why the press is not free around the world and To examine the advantages of press freedom in a country

2. Literature Review

According to Sambe and Ikoni (2004, p.11) as cited in Apuke (2017), “press freedom focuses its attention on the unrestrained liberty to write or publish information for the consumption of the public”. Ajijola (2023) defines it as the freedom to gather process and disseminate the news and information collected without cohesion or inhibition resulting from unknown fear from the power that be. This means that the press is to be free to talk about the ills of the society and the government without fear or restraints. The press has been given the mantle to be the mouthpiece of the people and the government so it is only right that they are allowed to freely describe things happening in the society. According to Jennifer (2023), Media freedom is

necessary for democratic society, meaning that for a society to be recognized as democratic the level of press freedom has to be high.

Lastly consider my own definition, Press freedom is the privilege to gather, hold disseminate information and express opinion.

The presence of press freedom is felt in some parts of the world, for example;

1. Norway: Norway consistently ranks high in press freedom indexes. The country's strong press freedom has contributed to a robust democracy and high levels of transparency. It has allowed for investigative journalism that has exposed corruption and political scandals, leading to accountability and public trust in institutions.
2. Finland: Finland is known for its excellent press freedom environment. The country's media landscape includes diverse and independent outlets that engage in critical reporting. This press freedom has played a role in Finland's high levels of social cohesion, transparency, and public participation in democratic processes.
3. Costa Rica: Costa Rica has a long-standing tradition of press freedom in Central America. The country's free press has been instrumental in exposing government corruption, environmental issues, and social injustices. It has helped shape public opinion, mobilize citizen movements, and hold authorities accountable.
4. Canada: Canada is known for its strong press freedom protections. The country's independent media have contributed to informing the public on a range of issues, including indigenous rights, social justice, and environmental concerns. Journalistic investigations have led to policy changes, and media outlets provide diverse perspectives, enriching public discourse.
5. South Korea: South Korea has made significant strides in press freedom, transitioning from a country with limited media freedom to one with robust independent journalism. The free press has played a vital role in South Korea's democratization process, exposing political scandals, promoting accountability, and facilitating public debate on critical issues.

2.1 Press Freedom in Nigeria

For nearly six decades, the Nigerian broadcast industry was under the economic and political control of the Federal, Regional and State governments (Ndolo: 2005:115). This government monopoly over ownership and control of broadcast stations in Nigeria continued amid persistent call for the deregulation of the industry until 1992. Then, the military president of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Babangida as stated in unit 2 of this module promulgated Degree number 38 which empowered private investors to own and operate broadcast stations. The decree also established the National Broadcast Commission (NBC) to regulate the affairs of broadcasting in Nigeria.

According to the Reporters without borders index, Nigeria ranks number 123 on the world when it comes to press freedom. Nigeria is said to be one of the most dangerous and difficult countries for journalists, who are often monitored, attacked and arbitrarily arrested. As earlier stated the press in Nigeria has been in chains from inception, however when looking into the issue press freedom in Nigeria it is important to first identify the legal bases of press freedom in Nigeria. The following are the legal bases of Press Freedom applicable in Nigeria.

1. United Nations General Assembly Resolution 59 (1) of December 14, 1946.
2. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of December 10, 1948.
3. Articles 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of December 10, 1966.

Now that we have identified that there is a legal basis for press freedom in Nigeria, it is important to note

that while Nigeria has a constitution that guarantees freedom of the press and expression, the reality on ground is different. Below are some keys points regarding press freedom in Nigeria:

- **Attacks on Journalists:** In Nigeria, journalists frequently experience intimidation, harassment, physical assaults, and perhaps even death while carrying out their professions. Government officials, security personnel, political figures, and criminal groups are just a few of the sources that can threaten or physically harm journalists. These incidents foster a culture of self-censorship and fear among journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported several incidents of attacks on journalists in Nigeria, including the arrest and detention of journalists, physical assaults, and even killings. One notable case is the murder of investigative journalist Ahmed Hussein-Suale in 2019.
- **Media ownership and influence:** Few influential people and groups own a disproportionate amount of media ownership in Nigeria, which may have an impact on the independence and variety of media outlets. Some media outlets are charged with being influenced or under the thumb of political or commercial interests, resulting in skewed reporting or the censoring of particular topics. The ownership of major media outlets by politicians or business figures with close ties to political elites raises concerns about editorial independence and the potential influence of vested interests on media content. Take for example the relationship between the Nigerian President and TVC.
- **Censorship and regulations:** The Nigerian government has come under fire for attempting to censor and regulate the media. There are worries about censorship and restrictions on press freedom because the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) has occasionally given instructions and fines to media organizations for purported infractions of broadcasting standards. In 2021, the Nigerian government fined Arise and some other media houses for their reportage on the 2020 EndSars protest This move was widely seen as an attempt to stifle freedom of expression and limit access to information.
- **Internet Freedom:** The Nigerian government has also taken part in limiting social media sites and online places. Twitter was momentarily suspended in Nigeria in 2021, which was perceived as an attempt to stifle free speech and restrict access to information.
- **Arrest of Journalist:** Apart from attacks on journalists are being arrested and detained unjustly. Excessive bail condition is deterrent for journalists and force them to remain in detention. For example, the case of the editor of the *Eagleforesight* news website Bashiru that was arrested in late April 2022 for publishing an article reporting that the current governor of Ogun state Governor Dapo Abiodun was jailed in the United States in 1986. The court ruled on 21 June that he could be released only after depositing a very large bond of 4 million naira and producing sureties who must provide their phone numbers and full address, bank account details and property certificate. According to the Director of the Journalist Without Border's West African bureau *"By setting an especially high bond, the federal high court is using a deliberate strategy to silence and censor journalists and keep them in prison"*.
- **Attack on media houses:** Journalists are not the only ones who are affected by these attacks in some cases their offices are the focus of these attacks. For example in January 2022 when the Nigerian Intelligence Agency stormed the headquarters of the People's Gazette demanding to see

the Managing Director and a reporter in order to identify the source of a confidential memo questioning the head of the agency's qualification for the job. The officials handed a letter to the journalists present criticizing and "threatening" to use other options if the website did not hand over its copy of the memo and identify who wrote it. According to another report made by the Programme Officer of the International Press Center, Mrs. Melody Akinjiyan at 'The World Press Freedom Day Journalist Roundtable and Stakeholders' forum on Journalist safety and protecting freedom of expression in the Age of Misinformation and Disinformation' in Ibadan Oyo state, she stated that no fewer than 66 journalists and three media houses suffered from various forms of attacks in 2022. These attacks ranged from harassments, invasion, abduction, gun attacks, hacking of account among others

Nigeria has a thriving and active media environment despite these obstacles, with many independent media outlets and journalists dedicated to preserving press freedom and exposing corruption and human rights violations. International organizations and members of civil society organizations continue to promote press freedom and the defense of journalists' rights in Nigeria despite many challenges that comes with it due to advances in technology in the area of artificial intelligence and cybersecurity [9],[10],[11],[12],[13],[14] .

Let us proceed to identify some of the benefits of press freedom in Nigeria

- **Government Accountability and Transparency:** Press freedom is essential for encouraging transparency and keeping governments responsible. Journalists operate as watchdogs, looking into and documenting government actions, uncovering corruption, and making sure public servants are accountable to the people they represent.
- **Democratic Development:** Press freedom and the growth of democracy are strongly related. It promotes informed citizenship and active involvement in democratic processes by enabling the open exchange of information, public discourse, and the expression of different opinions.
- **Human Rights Protection:** By exposing violations of human rights, discrimination, and social inequities, a free press protects such rights. Journalists are essential in promoting human rights and amplifying the views of underrepresented groups.
- **Economic development:** encouraging an open and transparent corporate environment, press freedom supports economic growth. It makes information flow easier, promotes investment, and aids in the detection and prevention of economic mismanagement and wrongdoing.

2.2 Theoretical Framework:

This research work looks at Press Freedom through the scope of three of McQuail six theories of mass communication which are:

- **Authoritarian Theory:**

This is a theory that can into existence in the 16th century, it is otherwise known as the "American Theory". The ideology is that the government should be in control of the media, to keep the ruling class and the government bodies safe from the poking nose of the press. Here the press is not free at all; it is seen as a tool for the government to promote activities and their propaganda. Any media house that goes against the wish of the government is faced with great sanction.

- **Libertarian Theory:**

Following the failure of the Authoritarian practice, the libertarian theory came into existence in America although it originated in England in the 17th century. It stemmed from "Enlightenment thought and natural

rights". The basic principle here is that the press is to be free to do post whatever they want without government control. Just as earlier stated in the beginning of this work the members of the press here are seen as ethical and rational meaning they know the difference from right and wrong.

The underlying principles are:

- ❖ “Attacks "on government, official party or political party should not be punishable.
- ❖ No media organisation should be compelled to publish anything.
- ❖ No restriction should be placed on any legal means of getting information for publication.
- ❖ There should be no restrictions on export (sending) or import (receiving) messages across national frontiers.
- **Democratic Participant Theory:**

This Theory promotes grassroots media support for cultural plurality. The media should be used to inspire and strengthen diverse groupings. It urges the creation of creative "small" media that group members can actively manage. To put it another way, the current media system's bureaucracy, commercialization, and professional predominance should be dismantled in order to permit or ensure easy media access for all potential users and consumers. The idea expresses dissatisfaction with libertarian and social responsibility theories for failing to provide the anticipated societal advantages. It criticizes both the concentration and bureaucratization of government-controlled media as well as the commercialization and monopolization of privately held media.

2.3 Methodology

This study used an online survey methodology to collect data, addressing a variety of Nigerian journalists. A Google Forms-hosted questionnaire was distributed among numerous online journalist discussion groups using the painstakingly designed River sampling method. Impressively, a whole cohort of 60 journalists actively participated in the survey by accessing and responding using the Google Forms link, yielding a remarkable response rate of 100%. A fair representation of gender perspectives was achieved among the respondents by having 38 people (or 30%) identify as male and 28 people (or 30%) as female.

Years of Experience as a journalist

Table 1

Years of Experience	Response	Percentage
1-5 years	15	25
6-10 years	25	41.7
11 years above	20	33.3
Total	60	100%

Source: Online Survey 2023.

Table 2 - Beat of Journalism

Beat of Journalism	Response	Percentage
Entertainment	15	25
News	15	25
Investigative Journalism	5	8.3
Sport	15	25
Others	10	16.7
Total	60	100%

Source: Online Survey 2023.

Table 3 - Do you agree that the press in Nigeria is free?

Press Freedom	Response	Percentage
Strongly Agree	35	58.3
Agree	15	25
Indifferent	5	8.3
Strongly Disagree	-	-
Disagree	5	8.3
Total	60	100%

Source: Online Survey 2023.

Table 4 - How would rate the level of press freedom in Nigeria?

Level of Press Freedom	Response	Percentage
Very High	35	58.3
High	15	25
Indifferent	5	8.3
Very Low	-	-
Low	5	8.3
Total	60	100%

Source: Online Survey 2023.

Table 5 - Professionalism, Attacks and Killings, Government Censorship and lack of access to information are some of the problems of press freedom in Nigeria. Do you agree to this statement?

Problems of Press Freedom	Response	Percentage
Strongly Agree	35	58.3
Agree	15	25
Indifferent	5	8.3
Strongly Disagree	-	-
Disagree	5	8.3
Total	60	100%

Source: Online Survey 2023.

Table 6 - Do you agree that press freedom has an advantage in the society?

Benefit of Press Freedom	Response	Percentage
Strongly Agree	35	58.3
Agree	15	25
Indifferent	5	8.3
Strongly Disagree	-	-
Disagree	5	8.3
Total	60	100%

Source: Online Survey 2023.

Table 7 - It is said that for a country to be seen as democratic the level of press freedom is to be consider. Do you agree to this statement?

Benefits of Press Freedom	Response	Percentage
Strongly Agree	35	58.3

Agree	15	25
Indifferent	5	8.3
Strongly Disagree	-	-
Disagree	5	8.3
Total	60	100%

Source: Online Survey 2023.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations The research's findings unmistakably demonstrate Nigeria's severe lack of press freedom. Violence events, severe budgetary limits, and a generalized air of uncertainty are obviously expressed by this stark reality, working collectively as strong barriers to the free operation of the press. Unquestionably, press freedom is important for fostering a strong democracy; however, many countries, including Nigeria, seem to have ignored this essential tenet.

In stark contrast, nations that have ardently embraced and sustained high levels of press freedom stand out as examples, like Norway, Finland, and Sweden. A rich culture of public conversation thrives within its borders, governmental transparency is upheld as a pillar, and the populace is consistently well-informed, empowered by the insights and analyses offered by an unrestricted press.

Authors like Pippa Norris and Carole Pateman have explored the symbiotic relationship between media freedom and democratic performance. Their research supports the argument about the benefits reaped by countries with robust press freedom.

Nations must recognize that press freedom is an essential component of a healthy democratic society rather than merely an extravagance. The disparity between Nigeria's press freedom and its thriving expression in nations like Norway, Finland, and Sweden serves as a poignant reminder of the necessity to protect and cultivate a setting in which the press can operate independently, ultimately contributing to the prosperity and enlightenment of the country.

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