

**Analysis of the views and experiences of Nigerian Journalists on Safety and Impunity against media rights**

**Ngozi Comfort Omojunikanbi (Ph.D)**

Department of Journalism and Media Studies

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies

University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

[ngozi.omojunikanbi@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:ngozi.omojunikanbi@uniport.edu.ng)

**Abstract**

This article presents an analysis of the current situation of journalist safety in Nigeria and the challenges that journalists face in their fight against impunity. It begins by discussing the current state of press freedom in Nigeria and how the government and media can interact to improve the safety of journalists. According to reports by the Media Rights Agenda (MRA), impunities like harassments, physical assault, brutalization, armed robbery, threat to life, unlawful arrest and detention, bruises, fracture and public humiliation are on the increase. This study adopts qualitative research method, (21 in-depth interviews with practicing journalists and law makers in Nigeria). This article asserts that with increased commitment from lawmakers, the media, and civil society, Nigeria can create a better environment for journalists, and further fight against impunity.

**Keywords:** journalist, safety, impunity, Nigeria, lawmakers, media.

## **Introduction**

According to UN High Commission for Human Rights, all individuals are entitled to the full protection of their human right, whether the State recognizes them as ‘journalists’ or not, whether they are professional reporters or ‘citizen journalist’, whether or not they have a degree in journalism, whether they report online or offline. Journalist are saddled with the responsibility of informing citizens about current issues and acts like the watchdog who inform the general public about the good and bad policies of the government or government agencies, and other current events in the public such as crime, inventions and outbreak of a disease, as well as trending issues in his environment or society. Journalists are importance in the process of gathering information to move from its originating point to the media, which in turn transmit to the general public. It is therefore important to safeguard the journalists’ as they execute their lawful duties.

Journalist safety is the total safety of a journalist in the course of performing their normal duty of keeping the society informed and educated through the gathering, processing and dissemination of public information. Journalists’ should be able to discharge their duties without fear of revenge as a consequence of undertaking their duties. Many journalists globally get killed, abused, harassed, unlawfully arrested, murdered, persecuted, serve jail terms, humiliated, suffer insult, and physical assault yearly. Journalists are targeted for elimination due to the nature of their job. This makes them prone to attacks especially by those who feel threatened by their reports. Journalists as watch dogs of the society therefore require freedom/autonomy, fair treatment to be able to perform their assignments. Journalists are vulnerable to psychological, physical and emotional harm and even death. All these are perceived to happen as a result of the poor state of press freedom in the nation. The journalists are supposed to be given enabling environment that is conducive by the Nigerian government so as to perform their duties without fear of reprisal or intimidation. Advocacy/campaign for journalist safety must be in top gear so as to safe guide the journalist who are executing their natural duty. This paper therefore sought to analyze the views and experiences of Nigerian Journalists on Safety and Impunity against media rights.

The objectives of this study therefore are to:

1. find out the threats experienced of Nigerian journalists in the course of their job.
2. Find out how journalists respond to these threats.
3. Examine the impact of safety threats and impunity on the journalist.

## **Journalist safety and the case of impunity**

Journalists are considered safe if they enjoy freedom from all forms of attacks while performing their constitutional duties/roles. It is imperative that the safeties of journalists are guaranteed to enable them function optimally. The professional calling of journalist should enjoy autonomy, independence, flexibility and ease access to critical information (Pate & Idris, 2016). Section 39 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees freedom of expression but Nigeria, joined the list of countries where journalist are killed and assaulted with little or no effort to bring culprits to book (Aondover and Abubakar, 2017). This is perceived to have created fear, panic and anxiety among the journalist, and many due to fear of the unknown.

It is perceived that many journalist deliberately skip certain information's that might be of great interest to the public, just to safe guard their lives and that of their families because they perceive that then a journalist is attacked or members of his family are attacked because of the role they play in the society and nothing is done to the perpetrator of this crime, it gives room for further attack. All this happen as a result of the poor state of press freedom in the nation. The journalist in Nigeria are still struggling. There are perceived challenges associated with press freedom in Nigeria, there is still perceived policy strategies that can be implemented to further ensure the safety of journalists in Nigeria. The journalists are supposed to be given an enabling environment that is conducive by the Nigerian government for the journalist to perform their duties without fear of reprisal or intimidation.

Impunity remains one of the greatest challenges to the safety of journalist in Nigeria and around the world. In a nation where the state has failed to establish the rule of law and practice its tenets, people in that nation will invariably take laws into their hands. Impunity threatens freedom, rights and ultimately, the democratic aspirations of citizens (*Premium Times*, May 3, 2013). The fight against impunity has been perceived as a constant struggle for journalists who seek to inform the public on current and relevant issues. This has been especially evident in recent times, as journalists face a number of challenges in their attempt to reveal and investigate various injustices. In recent report, the Media Rights Agenda (MRA) said impunities like harassment (Udoudo & Omojunikanbi, 2018).

Nigeria as a democratic nation needs a free press for it to publish their ideas and receive the ideas of others. They need freedom to be able to disseminate information freely to the public. As violence against journalist goes unpunished, the perpetrators are perceived to do more harm, knowing that nothing will be done against them. This gives room for further crime. If real legal consequences exist, perpetrators may think twice before committing such acts. A great number of journalist who in the course of performing their watchdog function in their society, are killed and in most cases, their perpetrators who has violated their human rights are not brought to book. All this is part of the violence against journalist and this issue is of great concern both to the journalist and their families.

In their fight against impunity, the journalist face a lot of challenges which includes ownership influence, lack of funding, insecurity, poor remuneration, lack of modern adequate equipment, poor salary, inadequate funding and employment of non-professionals. Nigeria is signatory to a lot of international treaties on human rights in 1983, Nigeria became African Charter on Human Rights and Peoples Rights in 1983, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1993, and an associate in the Convention Against Torture in 2001. Nigeria is also bound, State Parties of the United Nations by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that guarantees freedom of expression (PEN International, 2013). According to IPCD (2012): The aim of guarantying journalist safety and Combating impunity of the perpetrators of Crimes committed against journalists are both Essential to preserving the fundamental right to Freedom of expression, ensured by Article 19 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well As to promote democracy.

The safety of journalists and the fight against impunity for their killers are important to preserve the fundamental right to freedom of expression which is an assurance by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Every individual is entitled to freedom of expression, that should be respected, and as a result, no one should be killed, maimed or harassed for expressing himself or herself.

**Table 1: List of some journalists killed/murdered in Nigeria**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Date</b>
Alex Ogbu	Regent African Times	21/1/2029
Bagunda Kaltho	The News	1/3/1996
Bayo Ohu	The Guardian	20/9/2009
Bolade Fasasi	National Association of Women Journalists	31/3/1999
Chinedu Offoaro	The Guardian	1/5/1996
Edo Sulie Ugbagwu	The Nation	24/4/2010
Eiphraim Audu	Nassarawa State Broadcasting Service	16/10/2008
Eneche Akogwu	Channels TV	20/1/2012
Fidelis Ikwuebe	Freelancer	18/4/1999
Godwin Agbroko	ThisDay	22/12/2006
Ikechukwu Onubogu	Anambra Broadcasting Service	11/12/2017
Ikechukwu Udendu	Anambra News	12/1/2013
Maxwell Nasham	Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria	15/1/2020
Nansok Sallah	Highland FM	18/1/2012
Nathan S. Dabak	The Light Bearer	24/4/2010
Okezie Amaruben	News Service	2/9/1998
Ormifade Emmanuel Pelumi	Gboah TV	24 – 30/10/2020
Paul Aboyeji Ogundeji	thisDay	16/8/2008
Precious Owolabi	Channels TV	22/7/2019
Sam Nimfa – Jan	Details	27/5/1999
Sampson Boyi	The Scope	5/11/1999
Sunday Gyang Bwede	The Light Bearer	24/4/2010
Tuned Oladepo	The Guardian	26/2/1998
Zakariya Isa	Nigeria Television Authority (NTA)	22/10/2011
Isa	NTA	22/10/2011
Akogwu	Independent Broadcaster Channel TV	20/1/2012
Ikechukwu Uchendu	Monthly Anambra	12/1/2013
Adolphus Okonkwo	Voice of Nigeria (VON)	2/8/2013
Olatunde Ojenike	Federal Radio Corporation (FRCN)	2/8/2013
Afayat Odunsi	NTA	2/8/2013
Tordue Salem	Vanguard Newspaper	11/2021
Titus Badeyo	Naija FM	19/6/2021
Olubumi Afuye	Ondo State Radio Corporation	15/7/2021

Source: Aondover & Abubakar (2017).

These journalists are killed in questionable circumstances. They are murdered/killed in the line of duty. There is no conclusive investigation or prosecution of their killers. Nigeria being a democratic nation, need a free press for it to be successful. Democracy cannot thrive or flourish where citizens are not free to express themselves or publish their ideas and receive the ideas of others. Freedom of expression is a driver of all other human rights, and demands like constitutional right to life, to property, to religion, to movement, to

equality before the law, to spousal relationship, to non-discrimination, against arbitrary arrest, detention etc acquire substance only to the extent that they are communicated freely,

### **Theoretical framework**

Perception can be defined as people beliefs, attitudes, judgments and feelings, as well as the wide social or cultural values and dispositions that people adopt, towards hazards and their benefits (Herey, 2017). Perception is public attitude or reactions and this is majority characterized in the way or by the way they view or receive or perceive information, therefore, it is important to tailor the contents of the information to attract and appeal to the senses of the audience, putting into consideration the various cultural, social and political diversities of the concerned citizens. It is therefore important for this communication to have a better knowledge and understanding of the people's concerns and perceptions of risk (Aven & Renn, 2010). This will enhance the perception and acceptance of such message or information. This theory is relevant to this study as it will help analyze the personal views, perceptions and experiences of Nigerian Journalists on Safety and Impunity against media rights.

### **Methods**

The qualitative research design was adopted. The researcher conducted a series of in-depth individual interviews with practicing journalist and a lawyer. The interview was a face to face conversation between the participants and the researcher to convey information to the interviewer (Cresswell, 2009). The discussion was necessary to investigate the topic. The journalist works for different types of organization (private and public newspapers / broadcasters). 18 journalists were interviewed.

This sample is not representative of all Nigerian journalists. Interviews were also conducted in person or by phone chat between February 2023 and May 2023 and lasted an average of 60 minutes. The interviews included questions about journalists' professional experiences of harassment, threats, abuse etc., how they responded and its impact on them as well as the way forward.

### **Results and Discussion**

A total of 18 journalists' were interviewed. 13 male representing 72% while 5 female representing 28% were interviewed. Majority of participants were between the ages 33 years and above (61%), followed by 28 – 32 (28%) and 23 – 27 (11%). Majority of the participants

*RO 1. To find out the threats experienced of Nigerian journalists in the course of their job.*

The journalist responded by saying that they have experienced threat to safety, harassment (online & offline), intimidation etc. some of the journalist said they have experienced threats to physical wellbeing and personal safety, one of the participant said "I was kidnapped and kept inside a bush for 5 days, until a ransom of ₦2,000,000.00 was raised, and this happened when I was returning from covering my beat, it was a horrible experience and I don't even wish my enemies that. I thank God for my friends and family that rallied round to raise the money which was given to my abductors. The one thing the kidnapper keep saying was that, "you talk too much, mind your business, next time, you might not be so luck".

Another said, he has faced harassment by the authorities by searches of body. A female journalist concurred by saying that she has been searched by authorities, one of the days she was travelling to see her family members, according to her, "I nearly slapped the officer, because of the abusive nature in which he searched her", though not only her was

searched. She attributed it to her being a journalist because they saw her identity card and identified her as a journalist.

However, some of the respondents said they have not experienced any personal harassment, but only hear and know some of their colleague experienced. One said, he has received both verbal and written threats due to the nature of his work, while majority of them said that they have encounter threats, insults and other forms of harassments through social media accounts. One of the participants said that he has stopped social media accounts for now, according to him “I left because of its negativity and negative psychological impact”.

*RO 2. Find out how journalists respond to these threats*

All 18 interviewees saw threats to their safety as a thing of great concern. Although, majority of them claimed that they are less concerned about false claims or insults about the beats they cover or even about themselves. Some said, if it is an online harassment / threat, they either make use of the block and report functions, mute or make use of other online platform responses.

One of the interviewees said “I simply ignore them. I do this because I recognize the public’s right to freedom of expression”. According to her, “discussing or reacting on such messages is a distraction and time wasting.

A journalist said “if the threats are too much, I do give up on covering some particular stories, I do this because of lack of support and protection from my media organization and government authorities”. Another one said “I simply withdraw”. Similarly, another journalist added, “I report, even though I know nothing will be done about it, I do that for record purposes”.

One of the respondents said “if it is an online threat or harassment, I respond by replying to the negative remarks, even though there’s a saying that silence is the best answer to a fool, keeping quiet or being silent can as well mean that you are in agreement with what is said, or that you are concurring to what is said. So, I’d rather reply to correct an impression than being mute about it or about the issue.

In summary, the interviewees had come to accept that a few accepted means to respond to these threats are reporting, correcting, ignoring, muting or blocking the perpetrators but its efficacy in doing so is doubted (Witterlin, *et al.*, 2021).

*RO 3. Examine the impact of safety threats and impunity on the journalist.*

Respondents all agreed that it I traumatizing, down grading the profession and making the core values of journalism a very useless one. A respondent said “ it is only in a society where doors are open to government criticism and free speech that people can enjoy liberalism and true democracy.

Majority of the interviewees said that the thought generates fear in them, and this fear make them to be very careful of what they say, write and the information they give out. Some said that they have resorted to elf censorship. A reporter said “sometimes, I feel like quitting the job, but this saying keeps me going, “when the going gets tough, the tough keeps going”.

Another participant said, “ Journalism is my profession, it is what gives me joy, I feel satisfied and fulfilled each time I am on it, therefore, I have made up my mind that no one can stop me, “like Esther, if I perish, I perish (laughs). The only thing I will beg the government I to do the right thing, let the masses be well informed and allowed to participate in a campaign against impunity.

*RO 4. Find out challenges journalists face in their fight against impunity*

The participants agreed that the major challenges faced is the lack of access to information and resources needed to investigate and report impunity. One of the participants said that “most of the information needed to gather evidence and research impunity is often hidden and protected by those in power, living journalist with limited access. Another participant said that “journalists often lack funds and resources to research and fight against impunity, leaving them unable to provide accurate and verified information to the public.

Another problem journalists face is the threat of censorship and suppression of information. According to one, “journalists often face pressure from powerful figures to keep certain information hidden, or to refrain from reporting certain stories, and encounter threats to personal safety if they uncover certain information. To another, a lack of legal protection is a major challenge for journalists who fight impunity. According to her, “while there is a great need for legal protections and resources to protect journalists from libel and defamation, these laws are often weak and difficult to enforce. This leaves journalists vulnerable to threats of legal action, and can have a significant impact on their ability to report freely on impunity.

These challenges create a difficult environment for journalists to report on impunity, and impede their ability to fight against injustice. Fortunately, there are various methods and solutions that can be employed to address these issues, such as the introduction of stronger libel and defamation laws, better access to resources and information, and improved protection from online censorship and surveillance. By implementing these solutions, journalists can be better equipped to fight against impunity and reveal the truth to the public.

Press freedom is a fundamental right that is regarded as essential for a functioning democracy. Despite this, various issues and challenges till affect the ability of journalists to practice their profession freely and safely said one of the participants, to him, legal challenges are the most common and robust threat to press freedom. In his words “governments and other powerful entities can use laws to design public discourse and limit the free flow of information. This includes restricting access to certain sources, enforcing excessive licensing requirements and criminalizing the publication of certain words or opinions. Recent examples of this can be seen in Russia, where freedom of expression is severely limited by restrictive laws, as well as in Turkey, where journalists can be subject to prosecution and imprisonment for alleged violations of security laws.

According to another participant, “governments restrict media outlets by denying them access to financing through taxes and other forms of support” to him, this can lead to a situation where media outlets are unable to operate independently and critically because they lack the necessary resources to do so. To one of the participants, cultural challenges can also be regarded as a major obstacle to press freedom. This includes issues such as the lack of access to educational opportunities, public distrust of the media, and the lack of representation of the marginalized communities in the media. Another participant said that “proliferation of misinformation, which can have serious repercussions for the overall freedom of the press is another challenge”. One of the participants is of the opinion that the

media outlets should strive to create an open and respectful dialogue in order to foster a culture of press freedom.

On policies that can be enacted to ensure safety of journalist, the respondents unanimously agreed that governments, international organizations, stake holders and well-meaning citizens must work together to ensure the safety of journalists and by so doing, take policy measures designed to minimize risk to journalist in dangerous environments. One of the participants said that “government must ensure that legal protections are in place to protect journalists from harm. Specifically, this may include protective legislation that criminalizes acts of violence and repression against journalists, as well as measures to ensure that journalist’s safety is priority for law enforcement and judicial systems”. Another participant, a female journalist said that “provision must be made in the legislation to hold government officials and those in positions of authority accountable for any violations against journalist”. Another said, that safety training should be provided to journalist by government to ensure that they are aware of potential risks and are able to protect themselves from harm. This training he went further to say can include information about physical safety measures, such as where to hide, how to dress appropriately for the situation, how to handle sensitive information, as well as training in more abstract topics, such as conflict resolution, reporting without prejudice, and principles of ethics for journalistic practices.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents said that not just the governments but international organizations must take steps to ensure that journalists have access to the necessary resources to conduct their work. Such as providing access to secure communication, providing financial support for travel to dangerous areas, and ensuring that journalists are informed of their rights and freedoms. This access to resources should also extend to those working in remote or rural areas, as well as those working in hostile environments.

It is believed by the researcher that by taking these policy measures, governments and international organizations can ensure that the safety of journalists is a priority and that journalists are able to report freely without fear of reprisal. This will have the effect of deepening the public’s knowledge of current events, enabling a better informed and more engaged public discourse.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Findings revealed that journalist experience harassment, threats, intimidation etc. although the threats experienced varied. The researcher discovered that the journalist either report, ignore, or withdraw in respond to attack to their safety. The journalist may also turn to colleagues, employers, law enforcement agencies, family members and friends for physical assistant, psychological support, protection or accountability, which is in line with the findings of Chen *et al.* 2020. It was discovered that the impact of impunity is traumatic on the journalists, it creates fear, emotional and psychological stress/trauma. This in turn affects the journalist rol and function as the watchdog of the society as some of them withdraw from taking certain responsibilities or go into self-censorship.

There should be more global campaign to sensitize the general public on the importance of the safety of journalists and the fight against impunity. Locally, Nigeria should uphold its statutory obligation of ensuring protection and safety for journalists discharging their legitimate duties of keeping the citizens’ informed. States or local governments must ensure that the perpetrators of crimes, acts against human rights and acts of violence against media professionals are brought to justice. In addition, preventive measures should to be



taken to ensure that such crimes are not committed in the first place. There's need to take a pro-active measures.

## **REFERENCES**

- Udoudo, A. & Omojunikanbi, N.C. (2018). Press freedom and the two years of Buhari administration. *Integrity in Reporting: A Reader in An. Udoudo & C. Ochonohor (eds). A publication of Journalism Educators Foundation (JEF) University of Port Harcourt 396 – 408*
- Chen, G. N., Paromita, P., Victory Y.C., Madlin, M., Nina, S. & Franziska, T. (2020) “You really have to have a thick skin: A cross-cultural perspective on how online harassment influences female journalists. *Journalism 21 (7) 877 – 895.*
- IPDC (2012). The international program for the development of communication. *United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. Rev. 27 March 2012*
- Pate, U. & Idris, H. (2016). Professionalism and risk management in the reporting of terror groups and violent extremism in North East, Nigeria 2009. 2 -15 how journalists survive to report. A paper for the research conference for the safety of journalists organized by UNESCO. Helsinki, Finland.
- Winterlin, F., Klara, L., Svenja, B., Lena, F., Tim, S., & Thorstan, Q (2021) “Lost in the stream” Professional efficacyperceptions of journalists in the context of dark participation” *Journalism, May*