

## **PERISCOPING JOURNALISTS' SAFETY UNDERPRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI'S ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigated the safety of journalists under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration in Nigeria. The study was informed by media reports of intimidations, harassments and killings of Journalists by officials of President Buhari's Administration. In carrying out this investigation, four objectives were formulated out of which four research questions were designed to elicit data from respondents. Research design of survey was employed, while a 12-item questionnaire was used as research instrument. Population of the study comprised all registered journalists in Rivers State which was 512. Study sample of 150 respondents was drawn from the population through the Taro Yamane formula. Data were analysed

using simple percentages. In the end, study showed that no journalist was killed by state actors under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration; that the claim that no journalist was arrested was false; arrest of journalists was the most frequent measure employed against journalists' safety and freedom. It was recommended that government of President Muhammadu Buhari should strive to uphold the tenets of democracy and the rule of law; safety of journalists should be given priority attention; while safety insurance scheme should be given as incentive to journalists among others.

*Keywords:* Journalists; Safety; Journalism; Press Freedom.

### **Introduction**

Safety of journalists is an important factor for press freedom. According to UNESCO (2015), promoting the safety of journalists and combating impunity for those who attack them are central elements within UNESCO's support for press freedom on all media platforms. According to UNESCO reports, a journalist is killed every day on the average for bringing information to the public. Most times, attacks on media professionals are often perpetrated in non-conflict situations by organised crime groups, militia, security personnel, and even local police, making local journalists among the most vulnerable species. These attacks include murder, abduction, harassment, intimidation, illegal arrest and arbitrary detention. This scenario is common around the world including Nigeria.

President Muhammadu Buhari was sworn into office as President of Nigeria on May 29 2015, about thirty years after his regime as military Head of State. Buhari's military rule experienced a dark period in Nigeria's media history (Orlando, 2017; Ufuophu-Biri, 2016). This became a major fear for journalists who became concerned about the disposition of Muhammadu Buhari to journalists' safety as civilian and democratic president. To disabuse the minds of the public especially, the journalists, President Buhari on April 20, 2016, in his keynote address at the opening of the Congress of the Federation of African Journalists in Abuja, represented by Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, declared that his administration will not stifle press freedom in the country. He further assured journalists that his administration is committed to the safety of citizens including journalists.

In his speech as reported by Opejobi (2016), President Buhari said "I can report to this congress that not a single journalist is being detained or harassed in our country today not to mention killing of any journalist." However, in a quick response to the claim that no journalist has been harassed or killed by his administration, the West African Representative in the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Peter Nkanga, said that Buhari's claim that his government has not harassed any journalist is far from the truth. According to Nkanga, nothing has

changed from the attacks on the press witnessed in the last 16 years, since Nigeria returned to democracy. "Attacks are still ongoing, with the greatest level of impunity you can think of," (Africa Check, 2016).

Supporting the views of Nkanga, the International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law (Intersociety) declared that Nigeria under President Buhari ranked very low in press freedom. The group said the freedom of the press and democratic free speeches were also gravely endangered by the civilian government of Muhammadu Buhari in Nigeria. The group alleged that the infamous anti-press and repressive "Decree 4" of 1984 was being secretly operated in Nigeria under the civilian administration of Muhammadu Buhari.

Given the divided opinion about journalists' safety under President Buhari's administration, one would then ask: What is the level of journalists' safety under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration? This study therefore, sought to investigate the perception of journalists' safety under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration among journalists in Rivers State, Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the study**

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine the extent to which safety of journalists under President Muhammadu Buhari is guaranteed;
2. Ascertain the extent to which threat to journalists' safety influence their job performance;
3. Ascertain if any journalist was killed under Buhari's government;
4. Determine the measures employed by Buhari's administration against press freedom.

### **Research Questions**

Answers to the following research questions were sought by the study:

1. To what extent is safety of the press guaranteed under President Buhari's Administration?
2. To what extent does the safety of Journalists' influence their job performance?
3. Was any Journalist killed during President Buhari's administration?
4. What are the measures employed by Buhari's administration against press freedom?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The libertarian or free press media theory guided this study. It was one of the normative theories put forward by Siebert, Peterson and Shramm (1956) cited in Folarin (1989: p.25). In their book titled "The Four Theories of the Press", Siebert

et al (1956, p.1) opined that the "The Press always take on the form and colouration of the social and political structures within which it operates." The Libertarian theory according to Anaeto et al (2008) emerged around the 17th century and was relabeled "Free Press Theory" by McQuail in 1987. Central to Libertarian theory is the "Self-righting of the free market place of ideas". That means that good ideas would drive out bad ones if all ideas were guaranteed free expression (Folarin, 1989, p. 26.).

In its simple form, Libertarian or free press theory prescribed that individual should be free to publish whatever he/she likes or to hold opinion freely. This theory became most popular in the early half of the 19th century when the reference to the press as the "Fourth Estate of the Realm" was very popular. Libertarian media theorists are well known for their philosophy of rationalism and natural rights. In this theory according to Folarin (1989), the Press exists to check on government which requires that they be free from government control. Libertarian media Theory does not advocate press immunity to the rule of law; rather, it advocates that people including the media practitioners should be seen as rational beings able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. This renders prior-censorship of media from unnecessary and irrelevant. It again advocates that the Press be seen as partner with the government in the search for truth, rather than a tool in the hands of government. To do this, the Press people should be free to carry out their functions without harassment, intimidation or threats to their lives.

Libertarian Press theory coincided with the emergences of the Press from official control in the 17th century in the west and has become a foundation or justification for the demand for Press freedom around the democratic countries of the world. This is evident in the First Amendment of American Constitution which says that "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech...or of the Press".

In his contribution to free press, Thomas Jefferson, a great defender of liberty and hero of struggle for American independence, asserted that "If given the opportunity to choose a government without a Press or a Press without a government I will not hesitate to choose the latter ". The statement by Jefferson underlined the role and importance of press freedom as pivot of liberal and democratically functional society. With Free and efficient Press, the right, liberties and privileges of individuals are more guaranteed. Libertarian Press has been an integral part of democracy which has resulted in the advancement of the well-being of humanity and democratic societies across the world.

Libertarianism or free press media theory will be applied to guide this study to ascertain how much the tenets of this theory as it relates to journalists' safety are complied with or violated by President Muhammadu Buhari's administration in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Review**

### **Press Freedom**

Dictionary.com defines press freedom as the right to publish newspapers, magazines and other printed matter without government restriction and subject only to the laws of libel, obscenity, sedition among others. Search Wikipedia says that freedom of the press is the freedom of communication and expression through a medium including various electronic media and published materials. Whenever such freedom exists, it mostly implies the absence of interference from an overreaching state. Its preservation may be sought through constitutional or other legal protections.

The United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers." This philosophy is usually accompanied by legislation ensuring various degrees of freedom of publishing and speech. Despite the provision of "freedom of opinion and expression" in the United Nation's 1948 declaration of Human rights, some countries continue to have laws prohibiting journalists, television presenters, media-outlets and media-officials of any kind from expressing their personal political opinions through media censorship.

### **Role of Journalists to Society**

A journalist is generally referred to as media worker, especially the one who handles every stage of news or information from news gathering to dissemination to the audience. According to <http://shivamager.wordpress.com>, journalism is the investigation and reporting of events, issues and trends to a broad audience for different purposes. Journalists' role at the time was to act as a mediator or translator between the public and policy making elites. The journalists became the middle men. When elites spoke, journalists listened and recorded the information, distilled it and passed it onto the public for their consumption.

Journalists have many roles to play commonly as watchdogs, investigators, mediators, entertainers, analysts, informers, editors, commentators, and advertisers. They are community activists, agenda setters, and the voice of the voiceless. They are public servants, keepers of public records, protectors of democracy, and promoters of public dialogue. These roles journalists play earned them the title – "the fourth estate." The importance of journalism comes from the people's right to opinion and expression. This right cannot be possible without the press. The society today depends greatly on the press for information. Journalism cannot be separated from democracy. Journalism is the pillar of democracy.

### **Journalism and Safety**

According to information published by the International Media Support and obtained at [www.mediasupporting.com](http://www.mediasupporting.com), over 500 journalists and media workers

have been killed worldwide in the course of reporting the news. Many local journalists targeted often in direct reprisal for their reporting. Journalists reporting on local conflicts, corruption and other illegal activities also face threats of abduction, hostage taking, harassment, illegal arrest, kidnapping and detention (Bittner, 1989). In Nigeria, in particular, there have been serious threats on journalists' safety, which pose a major concern for their job. According to the West African Representative of the Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ), Peter Nkanga, in information obtained at [pearl.com.ng/2016/factcheck](http://pearl.com.ng/2016/factcheck) Buhari's claim-untrue, President Buhari's claim that the current administration has not harassed any journalist, is not true. On the website of CPJ at <http://www.CPJ.org/> are several cases where journalists have been attacked and detained by state officials since Buhari was sworn in as President on May 29, 2015. For instance, on June 1, 2015, police officials in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, attacked Muhammed Atta-Kafin-Dangi, a journalist with Radio Nigeria, for attempting to cover a protest staged by commercial motor-cyclists (Okada). The Kaduna State police charged reporter Jacob Onjewu Dickson with incitement over a story that angry young people stoned and booed Governor Nasir El-Rufai on April 27.

On 23 June, the publisher of prime magazine was severely beaten inside the Nigerian Customs Service office in Badagry-Lagos. Yomi Olomofe was reportedly investigating reports that customs officials on the Nigeria – Benin border were assisting smugglers, when more than 15 men attacked him and another journalists in the presence of senior officers of the agency, who did not intervene. Olomofe was beaten until he lost consciousness. Also, in November, same year officials of Nigerian prisons services and other security agencies beat Vanguard news journalist – Emmanuel Elebeke at the high court in Abuja after he took pictures of three murder suspects. Again on February 20, 2016 officials of the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps attacked and arrested three journalists in Owerri, Imo State, accusing them of having recorded a video of an argument between them and a motorist. In the process of the arrest, the journalists were punched, pushed, slapped and kicked.

### **Research Method and Procedure**

The survey research design was used in this study. The reason for the choice of survey was that it has the advantage of collecting and analysing data of representative sample of the population and generalizing results of such data to the entire population. According to Wimmer and Dommick (2006), survey is the most commonly used research design by behavioural scientists and scholars. The population of the study comprised all registered journalists in Rivers State which according to data available at the Rivers State Secretariat of Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) is 512. Out of this population, a sample of 150 was drawn using the Taro Yamane's formula (Okwandu, 2004:p.130; Onyekosor, 2014: p.52).

Taro Yamane's formula is presented as follows;

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(\ell)^2}$$

Where n = Sample size

N = Population

ℓ = Level of significance

The convenience selection technique as recommended in Gbeneka (2016, p.8) was employed in selecting journalists that served as respondents in this study. Applying the convenience methods means that since it was difficult to get all the journalists in one place, convenient sampling technique was used to distribute the instrument to only those journalists that could be reached and willing to participate in the study. A 12-item questionnaire served as the research instrument. It was designed to generate data for this study. It contained 12 simple questions which include structured and unstructured formats. Validity of instrument was achieved by the scrutiny and brainstorming of research colleagues. While reliability was realized by administering 15 copies of the study questionnaire on students of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used in determining the reliability which was found to be 0.78. Data collected were analyzed using simple percentages.

### Analysis of Data

**Table 1:** Percentage Responses to Extent of Press Freedom Under President Buhari's Administration

Criterion	Yes		Undecided		No		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Buhari's government upholds press freedom.	25	(16.7)	10	(6.7)	115	(76.6)	150	(100%)

Table 1 shows the response to the extent of press freedom under President Buhari's administration. A total of 16.7% agreed that Buhari's administration upholds press freedom, 6.7% were undecided, while 76.6% disagreed.

**Table 2:** Percentage Responses to Extent Threat to journalists' Safety Influence their Job Performance?

Criterion	Yes		Undecided		No		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Does the threat to safety of journalists influence their job performance?	125	(83.3)	15	(10)	10	(10)	150	(150%)

Table 2 shows percentage responses to whether the threat to safety of journalists can influence their job performance. A total of 125 respondents representing 83.3% responded yes to the question. 10% were undecided, while 6.7% responded no to the question.

**Table 3:** Percentage Responses to whether any Journalist was killed under President Buhari's Administration.

Criterion	Yes		Undecided		No		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Can you say any journalist was killed under Buhari's administration?	5	(3.3)	10	(6.7)	135	(90)	150	(100%)

Table 3 shows the responses to the question, if any journalist has been killed under Buhari's administration. The table shows that 3.3% responded yes, 6.7% undecided, while 90% responded no.

**Table 4:** Percentage Responses to measure(s) most Employed by Buhari's Administration against Press Freedom

Measures Employed	Frequency	Percentage
Censor of publication	27	18
Arrest	70	47
seizure of equipment	20	13.3
Imprisonment	2	1
Killings	0	0
Kidnapping	1	.7
Detention	30	20
Total	150	100

Table 4 show measures employed by Buhari's administration on press freedom. From the table, arrest was the most employed measures with 47% responses, followed by detention 20%, ceasure of equipment 18%, ceasure of publication 13.3%, imprisonment 1% and death 0%.

### Discussion of Findings

The discussion of the findings of this study was done on the basis of the research questions.

**Research Question One:** To what extent is press freedom guaranteed under President Buhari's Administration?

The inference from Table one indicates that there is no press freedom under President Muhammadu Buhari's leadership. This is because 76.6% representing 115 respondents disagreed with the assertion by President Buhari that journalists in Nigeria are enjoying press freedom under his administration. This also gives credence to the report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) that Buhari's claim was untrue.

**Research Question Two:** To what extent does the threat to journalists' safety affect their job performance?

Concerning journalists' safety and performance of journalists, 125 respondents which represent 83.3% responded 'yes'. This means that it is extremely difficult for journalists to perform their duties to society under unsafe environment and conditions. In such a situation, the public "right to know" are usually impeded. This finding is in line with Durodola's (2006) assertion that cases of harassment, arrest and intimidation of journalists are rampant in Nigeria. Under such environment journalists cannot give their best. To perform their job effectively, journalists must be provided with institutional and security support.

**Research Question Three:** Was any journalist killed during President Buhari's administration?

From responses to this question, it was clear and evident that no journalist was killed since May 29, 2015. This finding gave support to the statement by committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ) which absolved President Buhari's administration of killing of any journalist. This finding therefore absolved the President Muhammadu Buhari's and his administration of accusations by sections of the media and the public of killing of journalists in Nigeria.

**Research Question Four:** What are the measures most employed by Buhari's administration against press freedom?

From responses given to this question, it was obvious that arrest of journalists was the most frequently used measures. Findings also show that this act was usually carried out by security agents that are loyal to Nigerian government. This was the reason Durodola (2006) suggested that journalists should be more cautious to avoid arrest and should always inform their superiors about their movement so as to be located in case of arrest.

### **Conclusion**

It was obvious from the findings of this study that there were violations of press freedom under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. Though it was good to know from findings of this study that no single journalist was killed under the present administration in Nigeria, it is also worthy of note that the relationship between the Nigerian government and the press is nothing to be desired and far from being cordial.

### **Recommendations**

To bridge this gap, and ensure the safety of journalists in Nigeria especially under the present administration, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government of President Muhammadu Buhari should strive to uphold the tenets of Press Freedom. In dealing with journalists, security agents

should uphold the rule of law. Safety of journalists should be given priority by government and employers of journalists.

2. Employers of Journalists should provide insurance covers for them. Every act of violation against journalists must be investigated and violators should be brought to book and punished.
3. Journalist must be provided with institutional support, legal support and security support.
4. Also important for journalists' safety is that journalist must acquire knowledge on safety management and safety drills to be prepared ahead especially those covering the frontline conflict regions or beats in Nigeria. This is only being proactive.

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