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Chapter Twelve



Journalists' Online Safety Issues in Nigeria and their Consequences on Journalism Practice

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Abstract

In recent years, the landscape of threats faced by journalists in Nigeria has evolved from physical dangers to online harassment and cybercrimes. While physical safety in conflict zones remains critical, the rise of digital platforms introduces new risks that jeopardize journalists' safety and the practice of journalism. Despite current Nigerian laws designed to protect against such threats, there are notable deficiencies in effectively safeguarding journalists. This paper examines the types of online safety issues faced by Nigerian journalists and

their consequences on journalism practice. The study underscores the urgent need for robust legal frameworks, enhanced safety training, and comprehensive protective measures to ensure the safety and freedom of journalists in the digital age.

Keyword: Journalists, Safety, Nigeria, Consequences, Online, legal framework

Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of threats faced by journalists in Nigeria has undergone a significant shift from physical dangers to online harassment and cybercrimes. While physical safety in conflict zones remains a critical concern, the rise of digital platforms has introduced a new realm of risks that jeopardize journalists' safety and the practice of journalism. The digital age, while offering vast opportunities for information dissemination and public engagement, has also become a battleground where journalists are increasingly targeted.

Online harassment and cybercrimes against journalists and media organizations are becoming alarmingly prevalent. Onuche (2021) underscores the growing threat to press freedom posed by these online abuses. Current Nigerian laws, though designed to protect against such threats, reveal notable deficiencies in effectively safeguarding journalists. The need for robust legal frameworks and their stringent implementation is imperative to shield journalists from cyber threats and uphold the principles of press freedom.

The critical role of journalism in maintaining democratic values and facilitating public participation is under threat in this

evolving digital landscape. Journalists are essential for providing citizens with accurate information, enabling public discourse, and ensuring transparency and accountability in governance (Oyewo & Oyewo, 2016). However, the ability of journalists to fulfill these roles is increasingly compromised by online harassment and intimidation, which can lead to self-censorship and diminish the quality of reporting.

The issue of online safety for journalists is further compounded by the lack of adequate safety training and protective measures in journalism training institutions. Pate and Jibril (2023) highlight that journalists, particularly those in conflict zones like the North Eastern part of Nigeria, are ill-prepared to handle the risks associated with their profession. The absence of comprehensive safety education leaves journalists vulnerable to both physical and online threats, underscoring the urgent need for mainstreaming safety training in journalism curricula.

Ensuring the safety of journalists online is not merely about protecting individual rights; it is crucial for the functioning of a democratic society. Without the freedom to report and express without fear of retribution, the public's right to information is severely compromised. As the trend of threats shifts from physical to online, addressing these digital dangers becomes paramount.

Nigerian journalists, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, are not immune to these online safety issues, which may have significant consequences on journalism practice in the country. However, the nature of these safety issues and their specific consequences remain unclear. Hence, this paper examines these issues and their consequences on journalism practice in Nigeria, aiming to fill the existing gap.

Objectives

- To identify the types of online safety issues faced by Nigerian journalists.
- To examine the consequences of these online safety issues on journalism practice in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Journalism plays a pivotal role in democratic societies by fostering societal cohesion, facilitating public discourse, and upholding fundamental principles such as freedom of speech and the rule of law. This role is essential for informing citizens, holding governments accountable, and ensuring transparency in governance. However, the practice of journalism faces escalating challenges globally, marked by increasing violence and intimidation directed at journalists. In Nigeria, these challenges are particularly pronounced, with journalists encountering threats that range from physical assaults to legal harassment and impunity for crimes committed against them, all of which undermine press freedom and restrict the public's access to accurate and unbiased information (Oyewo & Oyewo, 2016).

The safety concerns of journalists, especially women, are exacerbated by the pervasive issue of online harassment. Research underscores that female journalists often endure acute, chronic, and escalatory forms of harassment online, which significantly impact their mental health, job satisfaction, and ability to perform their professional duties (Holton et al., 2021). These challenges are compounded for women journalists of color, who frequently experience targeted attacks that influence their digital interactions, shape the stories they cover, and perpetuate inequalities within the profession (Carlson & Witt, 2020).

In Nigeria, journalists covering high-risk events such as protests by groups like IPOB (Indigenous People of Biafra) confront substantial safety risks both online and offline. These risks include verbal abuse, physical threats, intimidation tactics, harassment through personal messages, reputational attacks, and even damage to equipment (Gever et al., 2023). Women journalists, in particular, report facing more severe challenges in online safety, often encountering gender-specific forms of harassment that undermine their professional autonomy and personal security. Conversely, male journalists more frequently contend with physical threats and violence in their reporting assignments. Addressing these issues requires robust safety protocols, comprehensive training, and institutional support to enhance journalists' resilience and ensure their safety while reporting from conflict zones and other volatile environments.

Moreover, the motivations of women journalists participating in closed online forums reveal a reliance on feminist ethics of care and gender-specific professional support networks. These forums serve as vital spaces for discussing safety concerns, sharing experiences of harassment, and seeking solidarity among peers facing similar challenges (Mesmer & Jahng, 2021). The presence of supportive environments within news organizations is crucial for mitigating the impact of harassment on job satisfaction, professional well-being, and retention rates among journalists, particularly those who have experienced personal threats and intimidation in the course of their work.

Overall, protecting journalists from physical and online threats is not only imperative for upholding press freedom but also for ensuring the public's right to access reliable and diverse information, essential for informed democratic participation. The complexities of these challenges underscore the need for

robust legal frameworks, enhanced security measures, and proactive organizational policies to safeguard journalists' safety and preserve the integrity of journalism as a cornerstone of democratic societies. This requires concerted efforts at the international, national, and local levels to strengthen protections, raise awareness, and promote accountability for violations against journalists, particularly in regions like Nigeria where journalists face unique and pressing risks (Hajara, Sanda, & Msughter, 2018).

By addressing these multifaceted challenges and supporting journalists in their critical role as watchdogs and informants, societies can uphold democratic values, foster transparency in governance, and ensure that journalists can work freely and safely in fulfilling their vital public service responsibilities.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theory of Digital Safety and Security. As outlined by Shackelford (2016), the theory is highly relevant when examining the online safety issues of journalists in Nigeria and their impact on journalism practice. This theory emphasizes the need to understand and manage digital threats effectively. In Nigeria, journalists face risks such as surveillance, cyberattacks, and online harassment, which can hinder their ability to report freely. By addressing these threats with tailored strategies like encrypted communication and secure data practices, journalists can mitigate risks and uphold their role as watchdogs in society. However, these challenges also highlight the broader need for policy interventions, improved legal protections, and global advocacy efforts to safeguard digital spaces for journalists worldwide.

Safety Issues and Journalism in Nigeria

In Nigeria, journalists face significant safety challenges that hinder their ability to report freely and securely. These challenges encompass both physical and digital threats, ranging from physical assaults and legal harassment to online harassment and cyberattacks. According to Oyewo and Oyewo (2016), these threats undermine press freedom by creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation among journalists, thereby restricting the public's access to unbiased information. The impunity often associated with crimes against journalists exacerbates these challenges, perpetuating a cycle of violence and impunity that threatens the integrity of journalism in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the safety concerns of Nigerian journalists are compounded by societal, governmental, and economic factors. Insecurity, lack of ethical adherence, and governmental influence on media organizations contribute to a hostile environment for journalists (Ogunmefun & Raheem, 2020). These factors not only endanger journalists' physical safety but also compromise their professional autonomy and the quality of their reporting. Addressing these issues requires concerted efforts to strengthen legal protections, enhance safety training, and promote a culture of respect for press freedom in Nigeria's media landscape.

Safety Issues Transcending Conventional to Digital Platforms

Journalistic safety in Nigeria has evolved significantly with the rise of digital technology, expanding threats from traditional physical risks like harassment and violence to include new challenges such as online harassment and cyberstalking (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). These developments underscore a critical need for a comprehensive approach to safeguarding

journalists in the face of societal, governmental, and economic pressures. Issues such as insecurity, ethical lapses, and undue political influence on media organizations undermine the profession's role in delivering accurate information crucial for societal progress (Ogunmefun & Raheem, 2020). During election periods, Nigerian journalists confront heightened risks that hinder their ability to report freely and participate in democratic processes, exacerbated by aggressive reporting practices and ethical breaches (Ibrahim, Pate, & Usman, 2020). Moreover, journalists reporting from conflict zones in Nigeria's Northeast region face significant safety deficiencies due to inadequate training and protective measures, highlighting the urgent need for enhanced safety education and institutional support to mitigate risks and improve reporting quality (Pate & Jibril, 2023).

Online Safety Issues for Nigerian Journalists

Online safety is a critical concern for journalists in Nigeria, where the pervasive threat of online harassment is driven by political biases, accessibility of journalists online, and identity-based prejudices like tribalism, racism, and misogyny. Digital platforms amplify these risks, enabling direct audience engagement that can escalate into coordinated attacks. According to Uwalaka, et al, (2023), digital space poses a significant threat to Nigerian journalists, driven by political biases, widespread access to the internet, and identity-based prejudices such as tribalism, racism, and misogyny. Uwalaka, et al, (2023) argue that the severity of online safety issues is tied to inadequate mechanisms that will guide and protect journalists' engagement online, hence the need for concerted efforts to mitigate the hostile online environment journalists face to uphold journalistic integrity in Nigeria.

Uwalaka & Amadi, (2024), posit that digital safety is an escalating concern among journalists. This is largely attributed

to perceived journalistic misconduct, unethical practices, and heightened political polarization. According to Ferrier, (2018), digital threats are gradually becoming integral to societal issues of gender inequality. For example, Nigerian female journalists have reported instances of lack of safety in the digital space. Such threats to safety include violence and sexual assault. Below are the online safety challenges journalists encounters in Nigeria;

- **Cyberbullying:** Journalists in Nigeria often face cyberbullying, which includes hostile or threatening messages, smear campaigns, and other forms of online harassment aimed at intimidating or discrediting them. This harassment can affect their mental health and professional reputation (Smith, 2021).
- **Hacking and Unauthorized Access to Personal Accounts:** Journalists often have their email and social media accounts hacked, leading to the unauthorized dissemination of sensitive information. This can compromise their sources and the integrity of their reporting. In Nigeria, there have been instances where journalists' accounts were hacked to prevent the publication of critical reports (International Press Centre, 2019).
- **Online Threats and Intimidation:** Threats of violence or legal action are commonly used to intimidate journalists into self-censorship. These threats are often delivered through social media platforms, email, or other online channels. Nigerian journalists frequently receive such threats, especially when covering sensitive or controversial topics (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020).

- **Misinformation and Disinformation Campaigns:** Journalists are targeted by campaigns that spread false information to discredit their work and undermine public trust in their reporting. These campaigns can be orchestrated by individuals, groups, or even state actors. In Nigeria, disinformation campaigns have been used to challenge the credibility of journalists reporting on political corruption and human rights abuses (Digital Rights Lawyers Initiative, 2021).
- **Digital Surveillance and Privacy Breaches:** Government and non-state actors sometimes engage in digital surveillance of journalists to monitor their activities and communications. This surveillance can lead to privacy breaches and expose journalists to additional risks. In Nigeria, reports have indicated that journalists are subjected to surveillance to stifle critical reporting (Amnesty International, 2019).
- **Social Media Harassment and Trolling:** Journalists face coordinated harassment campaigns on social media platforms, involving trolling, abusive comments, and spam. These campaigns aim to discredit, intimidate, and silence journalists. Nigerian journalists are often victims of such harassment, especially women journalists who face gender-specific attacks (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).
- **Cyberattacks:** In 2019, several Nigerian news websites were hacked, compromising sensitive data and disrupting news dissemination (Amnesty International, 2021). These cyberattacks illustrate the vulnerability of digital platforms used by journalists and the potential for significant disruption to journalism practice. According to HumAngle, (2023)“Our first experience with those

who attacked our website was recorded days after the #EndSARS protest shooting in 2020. We realized that our website could not be reached hours after we published a report that contradicted the claim of the military. We encountered an attack known as DDoS attack. It made our website inaccessible for our audience and we suspected that it was because of our report,” HumAngle's IT lead, Muhammad Jibrin said.

- Doxing: Cases of doxing, where personal information of journalists is published online, have been reported in Nigeria. This not only endangers the journalists and their families but also has a chilling effect on journalistic inquiry and freedom of expression (Posetti & Matthews, 2018). For example, during the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria in 2020, some online activists posted the home addresses and car registrations of some TVC journalists. The journalists failed to accurately report the impetus of the protest and the demands of the protestors.

Implications of Online Safety Issues for Journalism Practice in Nigeria

The consequences of online safety issues on journalism practice in Nigeria are profound. These threats can lead to self-censorship, where journalists avoid reporting on sensitive issues to evade online harassment or cyberattacks (Ferrier, 2018). This undermines the role of journalism in promoting transparency and accountability. Additionally, the psychological toll of online harassment can affect journalists' mental health, further impacting their professional performance (Ferrier, 2018). These implications are discussed in details below:

- **Self-Censorship:** The fear of online harassment or cyberattacks can lead journalists to self-censor, avoiding coverage of controversial or sensitive topics. This undermines the role of the press in holding power to account and informing the public (Posetti & Matthews, 2018).
- **Mental Health Impact:** The psychological impact of online harassment can lead to anxiety, depression, and burnout among journalists. This not only affects their well-being but also their ability to perform their duties effectively (Ferrier, 2018).
- **Professional Integrity:** Cyberattacks that result in the theft or manipulation of information can compromise the integrity of journalistic work. This damages public trust in the media and undermines the credibility of news organizations (Shackelford, 2016).
- **Limit Democratic Participation:** Online safety issues erode press freedom, limiting journalists' ability to report freely. This diminishes public access to diverse information, weakens democratic engagement, and undermines accountability, leading to a less informed and engaged citizenry (Truong, 2020).
- **Legal and Financial Repercussions:** Journalists facing online harassment encounter legal threats, including defamation lawsuits, which require significant resources. Financial costs for digital security measures burden smaller media outlets, diverting funds from journalistic endeavors (Björkenfeldt, 2023).

Conclusion

As this paper has shown, the digital era has fundamentally transformed journalism, offering unprecedented avenues for information dissemination and public engagement. However, this transformation has simultaneously exposed journalists to significant online threats, particularly in Nigeria. The findings of this study highlight the pressing need to address the convoluted online safety issues that journalists face, which have profound implications for the practice of journalism and broader democratic processes. Online harassment and cybercrimes against journalists in Nigeria have emerged as formidable barriers to press freedom. These threats not only compromise the safety and well-being of journalists but also undermine their ability to report freely and accurately. The prevalence of online harassment, cyberattacks, and doxxing creates an environment of fear and intimidation, leading to self-censorship and diminishing the quality of journalistic output. Furthermore, the psychological toll of these threats cannot be overstated, as it affects journalists' mental health and their professional efficacy.

It is worth noting that the implications of these online safety issues extend beyond individual journalists to the very fabric of a democratic society like Nigeria. As it is well established, journalism serves as a cornerstone of democracy, ensuring transparency, accountability, and informed public discourse. Therefore, when journalists are unable to perform their duties without fear of retribution, the public's right to access accurate and unbiased information is severely compromised. This erosion of press freedom undermines democratic participation and weakens the principles of governance and accountability.

While this study draws focus to some of the online safety issues, it is imperative to address these challenges with a comprehensive approach. This study proposes

recommendations that can facilitate the safety of media practitioners and journalists, creating a safe space for unbiased news reporting and coverage in the digital space. These recommendations are as follows:

- **Enhanced Digital Security Training:** Journalists should receive comprehensive training on digital security practices to protect themselves against online threats. This includes understanding how to secure their communications, manage online harassment, and use encryption tools effectively.
- **Legislative Frameworks:** There is a need for stronger legislative frameworks that specifically address online harassment and cybercrimes against journalists. These laws should provide clear definitions and stringent penalties to deter perpetrators.
- **Support Systems:** Establishing support systems, such as helplines and counseling services, can help journalists cope with the psychological impact of online harassment. Media organizations should also implement policies that support journalists facing online threats.
- **Collaboration with Tech Companies:** Media organizations and journalists should collaborate with tech companies to develop tools and policies that enhance online safety. This includes reporting mechanisms for online harassment and tools for protecting sensitive data.

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