

EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PRESS FREEDOM IN THE COVERAGE OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Coronavirus pandemic is currently ravaging the world with impacts felt in every sector of the economy. With this, the role of the press in providing in depth, objective, accurate and timely information is very crucial in preventing or reducing the spread of the virus and guide those affected towards services and treatment. Freedom is essential in the performance of the press in this regard. However, it was not clear how the press was free in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, hence, this empirical inquiry. Case study design involving four cases relating to the phenomenon was adopted to interrogate the puzzle in this study. Findings revealed the fights for press freedom by media organizations in Nigeria is not won yet as officials of government continue to abuse the right of journalists in the exercise of their legitimate duties like the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic. Arrests, charges, restriction on access to information, excessive fake news regulation, intimidation and physical attacks are used by the officials of government to prevent journalists from performing their legitimate watchdog functions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, press freedom violations amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria has negative impact on the ongoing effort to stem the pandemic as it prevent the public from having access to privileged and timely information that would have assist them better in fighting the disease. We concluded that press freedom is an essential factor that strengthens media independence and enhances effective performance but the existing cases of media freedom violations can limit the performance of the media in winning this fight. The study therefore, recommended for a freer environment for the press while operating within the confine of the law and ethics of their profession amid COVID-19 for a more positive result.

Keywords: *Exploratory Study, Press Freedom, Coverage, COVID-19 Pandemic*

INTRODUCTION

The responsibility of the press as watchdog of the society is recognized all over the world. This places them as the Fourth Estate of the Realm after Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary. As a Fourth Estate of the Realm, the press holds executive, legislature and judiciary accountable to the public by exercising functions of watchdog and surveillance. Ideally, media has three essential roles to play in democratization process and good governance: as a watchdog over the powerful, civic forum (for political debate) and agenda-setter (Norris, 2006). Democracy largely leans on effective communication system channeled through mass media (Jacob, 2002 in Sani, 2014). Freedom of the press or press freedom, which is “the right of individuals to print (publish) and disseminate information and opinions including criticisms of government without any sort of

interference whether governmental interference or any other interference” (Oloyede, 2008 in Layefa and Johnson, 2016, p. 24) is therefore, an essential ingredient to make the press vibrant enough to perform its watchdog function. It is a cornerstone to judge maturity of democracy in many societies and without the right to freedom of expression, and free, independent and pluralistic media, there is no true democracy (Council of Europe, 2020). It is important to note that respect for freedom of expression and the right of public to access and receive information result to transparency and accountability of governments (Sani, 2014). Without an informed citizenry, democracy is a mere farce and it is the duty of the Press to ensure that voters are well informed and capable of participating actively in public affairs (Ndudi Elumelu in Touitou, 2017). Council of Europe (2020) reports that media in times of crisis play an essential role and have a particular responsibility to provide accurate and reliable information to the public- such information are crucial for our health.

The link between press freedom and effective media performance is recognized by most societies of the world as evident in the 2008 World Press Freedom speech delivered by the former American President, George W. Bush, when he emphasized importance of the role of the press and mentioned that press freedom was enshrined in the United States constitution (Bush, 2008). The notion is that, independence of press from the state is an essential factor in the democratic environment in mediating between private domain and political elite in public sphere (Karikari, 2004). In Nigeria, Section 22 gives the press the right to hold the government accountable to its citizens, it guarantees, “The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the Government to the people.”

However, How free is the press in the discharge of its duty as watchdog as provided under this Section of the Constitution of the Federal Republic has been a gap difficult to bridge among scholars over the years, including in this COVID-19 era. This is in view of the fears expressed by the scholars in the past, including Touitou (2017, p. 7) that “Nigeria which professes to have one of the freest Press in Africa has a lot of limitations to press freedom”. It is contradictory to discover that the same constitution which guarantees press freedom takes away the same freedom it gives to media men. Section 39 (3) of the 1999 Constitution states as follows:

Nothing in this section shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society: (a) For the purpose of preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, maintaining the authority and independence of courts or regulating telephony, wireless broadcasting, television or the exhibition of cinematograph film; or(b) Imposing restrictions upon persons holding office under the Government of the Federation or members of the Nigeria Police Force or other Government security services or agencies established by law.

According to the Council of Europe Platform to promote the protection of journalism and safety of journalists (the Platform), from 2015 to 25 November 2019, 26 journalists have been killed, including 22 cases where there has been impunity, and 109 journalists are currently in detention; 638 serious press freedom violations have been perpetrated in 39 countries. Threats on media freedom and the safety of journalists have become so numerous, repeated and serious that they

are jeopardizing not only citizens' right to be properly informed but also the stability and smooth functioning of our democratic societies (Council of Europe, 2020). Nemeth (2020) notes that a free press is especially vital during times of emergency and there should be no state censorship or other undue restrictions on the free flow of information.

The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 also known as COVID-19 has posed a serious challenge to the world with all hands on deck to hurt its spread. As of August 22, 2020, there were 22812491 confirmed cases of the virus with 795132 confirmed deaths across 216 countries, areas or territories globally (WHO, 2020). **Rumours, mis- and dis-information about COVID-19 are spreading rapidly around the world and can be almost as harmful as the virus itself.** During a health crisis such as this, trusted, accurate and timely information can help communities prevent or reduce the spread of disease, and guide those affected towards services and treatment (Gunn, 2020). Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the free flow of news and information is more essential than ever, ensuring open dialogue and the exchange of vital information (International Press Institute, 2020). This fact was reechoed by the UNESCO Director-General, Audrey Azoulay in the speech delivered on the World Press Day May 3, 2020 that:

It is particularly important to mark World Press Freedom Day this year during the global COVID-19 pandemic and to keep press freedom on the agenda in the present situation. It takes journalism to communicate the findings of scientists and disseminate real and reliable information and counter fake news that is dangerous to people's lives and to efforts to contain the spread of the pandemic (UNESCO, 2020, p. 1).

The above excerpt is a pointer to the fact that press freedom is also essential in the COVID-19 era. In an opinion piece, Benedict (2020, p. 1) unveils that:

During this COVID-19 pandemic, a robust media environment is critical: access to life-saving information is key in the fight against the virus. As governments impose a range of restrictions in attempts to curb the pandemic, journalists help hold authorities to account by providing analysis, engaging in debate about government actions, and creating a space for dialogue about the future we all hope to see.

Despite the relevance of press freedom, there are cases of freedom violations as the report by the International Press Institute (2020) indicates. According to the report, there were 426 media freedom violation cases across the globe as of the time of this study, ranging from arrest/charges, restrictions on access to information, censorship, excessive fake news regulation, and verbal or physical attacks. Nemeth (2020) affirms that **access to accurate information is essential to fighting a pandemic. However, many governments hide behind the emergency to restrict media freedom.** European Parliament (2020) report similarly indicates that as the coronavirus pandemic continues to have significant ramifications for public health, social welfare and the economy, the crisis also presents a significant threat to media freedom. According to the report, media freedom proponents have warned that governments across the world could use the coronavirus emergency as a pretext for the implementation of new, draconian restrictions on free

expression, as well as to increase press censorship. In many countries, the crisis has been exploited for just such reasons, with political leaders using it as a justification for additional restrictions on media freedom. In its 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters without Borders argues that certain governments have used the crisis to impose media restrictions that in ordinary times would be impossible. This study therefore, is set out to identify cases of media freedom violations in Nigeria, who were involved, how they happened and the impact on the ongoing fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Statement of the Problem

The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease 2019 also known as COVID-19 has posed a serious challenge to the world with all hands on deck to halt its spread. Yet, as of August 22, 2020, there were 22812491 confirmed cases of the virus with 795132 confirmed deaths across 216 countries, areas or territories globally. Free flow of news and information is more essential than ever, ensuring open dialogue and the exchange of vital information amid this pandemic (International Press Institute, 2020). Journalists ensure that they communicate the findings of scientists and disseminate real and reliable information and counter fake news that is dangerous to people's lives and to efforts to contain the spread of this pandemic (Azoulay, 2020, p. 1). Although despite the role that journalists are playing in that regard, there are cases of freedom violations as the report by the International Press Institute (2020) indicates. According to the report, there were 426 media freedom violation cases across the globe as of the time of this study, ranging from arrest/charges, restrictions on access to information, censorship, excessive fake news regulation, and verbal or physical attacks. However, there is a gap on how press freedom is violated in Nigeria and the impact of such violations on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. This study therefore, is set out to bridge this gap by identifying cases of media freedom violations in Nigeria, who were involved, how they happened and the impact on the ongoing fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Objectives of the Study

The overall objective of this study is to explore press freedom in reporting the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives include:

- i. To identify cases of press freedom violations amid COVID-19 era in Nigeria.
- ii. To examine how press freedom is violated in Nigeria amid COVID-19 pandemic.
- iii. To determine the impact of press freedom violation on the fight against COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria.

Research Questions

- i. What are the cases of press freedom violations amid COVID-19 era in Nigeria?
- ii. How is freedom of the press being violated in Nigeria amid COVID-19 pandemic?
- iii. What is the impact of press freedom violation on the fight against COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Freedom is the right or ability to think, act, speak or write without interference. Press freedom is

therefore, the ability of the mass media to operate without the interference of the government. We are regarded as the apostles of the masses, the voice to the voiceless, the watchdog, the interpreters of news, the opinion molders, the pace-setters and the mouthpiece of new and current information. Unfortunately, from times past till now in the twenty –first century, the press have been victims of suppression, restriction and caution on and about various issues due to the suppression –power of press censorship. The press is the people involved in the news gathering business generally. Or all the people in gathering and reporting of the news, especially journalists and including Public relations practitioners (Touitou, 2017). Freedom of the press is a cornerstone to judge maturity of democracy in many societies. Respect for freedom of expression and the right of public to excess and receive information result to transparency and accountability of governments (Sani, 2014). Critical independence, democratic constructiveness and commercial viability are the cardinal principles of press organization. Governments have been using license and censorship to control the power of mass media and curtail its immense contribution and defense of fundamental human rights. As the Fourth Estate of the Realm, the press holds executive, legislature and judiciary accountable to the public by exercising functions of watchdog and surveillance (Bruns, 2008). Banistar (2006) in Touitou (2017), in a global survey of access to government information laws enunciates some of the benefits of freedom of information and press to include democratic participation and understanding; making government bodies work better; redressing past harm; and protecting other rights.

A pithy look at the journey in search of press freedom in Nigeria, however, reveals a fierce struggle by the press. Nigeria is a former political colony of Britain that got independence in 1960. The Federal Republic of Nigeria is a federal constitutional republic comprising 36 states and Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The country is located in the West Africa and shares land borders with the Republic of Benin in the west, Chad and Cameroun in the east, and Niger in the north. Its coast in the south lies on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. Nigeria is roughly divided in half between Christian who mostly live in South and Muslims concentrated mostly in the North. A minority of the population practice traditional religions. Nigeria is the most populous African country and seventh most populous country in the world. According to CIA, The World Fact Record, Nigerian population estimate of July, 2013 accounts roughly 175 million (Sani, 2014).

The press organizations started in Nigeria with Iwe Iroyin newspaper in 1859 by Henry Townsend in Abekuta (Abati, 1998). Robbert Campbell established the second newspaper called The Anglo-African in 1863 primarily to promote the interactivity between Britain and Africa (Dare and Uyo, 1996). The Lagos Times and Gold Coast Colony Advertiser were established in 1880 by Richard Beale Blaize (Abati, 1998). The success of Lagos Times became the precursor to the proliferation of print media in the country. However, about nine decades after the establishment of the press, broadcast media started up in the 1936 with the establishment of Radio Distribution Service in Lagos disseminated British Broadcasting Corporation programs. In the 1950s, former Western Region established Western Nigeria Television, and then followed by rapid emergence of radio and television stations across the country. In 1961, Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation was mandated by law to regulate the broadcast media in the country. There is a combination of both public (federal and states government) and private media ownership. There are 48 television stations owned by the Federal Government which operate by

Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), state governments have 37 stations, and 15 are privately owned. The Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria has 43 radio stations, 40 owned by states, 24 campus radio, and the Voice of Nigeria (VON) and 24 private (NBC, 2013). In the case of print media, there are over 90 titles of newspaper publications and over 40 hundred magazines titles. The accurate figure cannot be easy to get because of political and economic reasons that publications are closing down and new ones are coming up rapidly (Sani, 2014).

After independence in October 1960, Decrees¹ and regulations were promulgated to control and repress the press. Newspaper (Amendment) Act of 1964 and the Sedition Law of 1964 were among the several decrees the government. During the Nigerian civil war in 1967, the military promulgated war time Newspaper Decree 17 and Decree 24. Decree 24 gave absolute to the inspector-general of police and the army chief to detain without trail for an indefinite period anyone considered to a security risk (Sabowade, 1985 in Sani, 2014). Among first generation of Nigerian press who experienced censorship during the military colonialism include: Peter Enahoro, Tom Borha, Wilson Uwaifo, Michael Asaju, Sam Amuka, Neville Ukoli, Lateef Jakande, Sam Eguavven, Dan Agbase, Ray Ekpu, Lade Bonuola and Iro O morodion (Eribo and Jong-Ebot, 1997 in Sani, 2014). Several cases of arrests have been documented where a number of journalists have been arrested, intimidated and jailed for news reports the government considered embarrassing. For example, Tampson Thompson, Ndika Irabor of the Guardian newspaper, Femi Akande of Fame Magazine, Nosa Igeibor, Kola Ilori, Onome Osifo-Wiskey and Ayodele Akinkouotu of Tell Magazine were incarcerated while discharging their journalistic duties. It was also recorded that, police attacked and arrested members of the press of The Observer, The News and Daily Independent from 1999-2003 of Obasanjo civilian administration (Onadipe, 2002). This cruelty of police was as a result of accusation on the press of being critical and unfair reports and editorials on the Nigerian Government. As such, the press function of watchdog and surveillance were curtailed and repressed with marginalization of Nigerian populace. The Nigerian situation is among the bad cases of press freedom (Akinwale, 2010 in Sani, 2014).

There are a lot of factors in Nigeria that have militated against press freedom. According to Momoh (2002, p. 10), restrictive media laws could be said to have actually taken roots in 1903 with the enactment of Newspaper Ordinance of that year and the sedition Ordinance of 1909. As Momoh recalled, perhaps the most notorious press gag law was the 1917 Act". Nwanne (2014) adds that no doubt, these laws were put in place to curb the perceived "excesses" of the local press and sufficiently frighten them to desist from attacking the Colonial Administration. Most of those Draconian laws have remained in Nigeria's law books because the new rulers who took over from the colonialists were not interested in abrogating them. Not unexpectedly, therefore, in 1964, this earlier Act was amended and has been the basis of anti-press laws in Nigeria. The first civilian administration under Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister enacted the law. If the civilian administration was not particularly media-friendly, it was even worse with the subsequent military administrations, each of them trying to outdo each other in an effort to put the media in its "rightful place". Asemah (2011), International Press Centre (IPC) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) (2010) and Ogumka (2015) in Touitou (2017) have identified factors that militate against press freedom in Nigeria. Asemah (2011), for instance discusses some factors militating against

press freedom as: Legal Pressure; economic and Political Pressure; Secrecy; and direct Censorship and Force.

International Press Centre (IPC) and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) (2010), revealed that freedom of expression and media freedom is guaranteed by the constitution but there are limitations to exercising these rights; Journalists in the democratic dispensation have become more assertive in practicing their profession but self censorship and other constraints exist especially in government owned media outfit; Media owners also limit the extent of journalistic practice because of the premium they place on their relationship with business and the political class; There are still laws in our statute books which restrict freedom of expression such as the Official Secrets Acts, Criminal Defamation Law etc; Protection of confidential sources is not guaranteed by law; Public information is not easily accessible; Broadcasting legislation is deficient, there are complaints on the very exorbitant licensing fees which only commercial broadcasters can afford; Editorial independence is not guaranteed from political interference especially in government owned media outfit, this is because these organizations are funded by the State and seen as tools for propaganda purposes; The harsh economic environment has a negative impact on the media and can compromise it; Some Private media outlets are not run as efficiently and professionally as expected, there are noticeable managerial lapses such as poor staff welfare and lack of administrative skill; Broadcasting regulation is not entirely transparent as most members of the Broadcasting regulatory agency are Government appointees who have no choice but do the bidding of their principal; Appointment procedure for members of the regulatory body is not open and transparent, civil society involvement is nil; There is regular interference by government in the state media, the boards appointed by government exist to protect and defend government interests; Appointments into boards of regulatory agencies are more of political patronage than for public good; There is problem of adequate funding of State broadcasting media outlets; Programming is not as diverse as expected; Self-censorship is prevalent in both State and privately owned media organization because of fear of loss of job, killings, official reprisal and libel cases; Politicians now own media organizations as such interference with editorial independence is a possibility; Salary and general working conditions of journalists are a far cry from being adequate as such corruption and compromise is prevalent. Ogumka (2015) in Touitou (2017) identified some ethical problems militating against freedom of the press as sycophancy; character assassination; confidentiality of source; invasion of privacy; inaccuracy; and lack of fairness.

There are also empirical evidence that show the relationship between press freedom and the media performance in and outside Nigeria. For instance, Layefa and Johnson (2016), in their study revealed that although, free press is yet to be realised, the resounding victories so far recorded in our political landscape as championed by the Nigerian press are pointers to the possibility of the realisation of free press in the Nigerian society. Among others, the authors see, especially, the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), as a sound leeway to the realisation of free press in the Nigerian society. How soon then the press is going to achieve that is a question that one must continue to seek for an answer. Sani (2014), in his study revealed that the press in Nigeria is considerably free since it repeatedly covers issues that are considered critical to the government by giving such stories prominence to appear on the cover page. However, one may ask if it is true that the press in this country is free. Nwanolue and Ude-Akpe (2011), in their

study on “Freedom of the Press in the Eyes of Nigerian Law” have found that the 1999 Constitution acknowledges that media, being the watch-dog of the society is the main vehicle by which rulers misdeeds. The developmental function and roles of the media include gathering and dissemination of information, verification of news, education and enlightenment of the people, shaping of public opinion, setting of national agenda, safeguarding of right of individuals, interests, groups, advertisement of goods and services etc. saddled with this responsibility, the media cannot function effectively without proper legal backing. Nwanolue and Ude-Akpe (2011) argued that Chapter two of the 1999 Constitution on which Section 22 rests is filled with laudable provisions which in Nigeria are non justiceable. Since 1960, Nigeria press cannot be said to have enjoyed unrestricted freedom. According to these scholars, freedom of the press is not clearly spelt out in the 1999 Constitution. The situation was not better under military. They emphasized that a media that is not accurate, factual, detailed and authoritative cannot lay claim to holding public officials accountable, because its own sense of accountability can easily be challenged.

Ndinojuo and Udoudo (2018), in their study on “A Converted Democrat? Profiling the Attacks on Nigerian Journalists During Buhari’s Civilian Regime (2015-2017)” revealed that In spite of President Buhari’s government recent press freedom claim, no fewer than 38 newsmen and women were arrested or harassed and at least one killed by gunmen in the two-year period. Interestingly, none of the cases was linked directly to Buhari personally, unlike his term as a military dictator. Nevertheless, the cases of abuse recorded so far was an indication that President Buhari should initiate actions that safeguard the social responsibility credential of journalists. Touitou’s (2017) study concluded that in order to achieve the important aim of assisting to give democratic participation ‘meaning’, the press must fulfill their professional roles. Akeem’s (2010) study showed that although the press facilitated the development of democracy, challenges to press freedom were frequent. Nwanne (2014), in his study on another Look at press Freedom in Nigeria revealed that since independence, infractions on press freedom were mostly experienced during the military era with the enactment of many press gag laws. According to his findings, there have been improvements in the level of tolerance by post 1999 civilian administrations but much still has to be done to attain a reasonable level of press freedom. Oberiri (2017), in his study on “Exploring the Extent of Press Freedom in Nigeria” revealed that there are a lot of factors in Nigeria that impedes or militates against press freedom ranging from secrecy, legal pressure, direct censorship and force among others. Findings also revealed that Nigerian press freedom is a paradox and only exist on paper i.e. on Constitution but not in practice. Allen, Ogochukwu, Nwakego & Chukwuweike (2019), in their study on “Freedom of Information (FOI) Act and Journalism Practice in Nigeria: An Appraisal” revealed that the benefits which the FOI Act is envisaged to bring to journalism practice include legal coverage for the journalist as they accesses information; reduction in cost of accessing information; and reduction of risk involved in seeking sensitive information. According to the findings, there has been an encouraging increase in the number of individuals and organisations demanding for information pursuant to the provisions of the Act. However, these individuals and organisations are largely outside the media industry, implying that there is apparent reluctance on the part of Nigerian journalists to harness the FOI Act. Factors adversely affecting utilization of the FOI Act in Nigeria include the legal, political and judicial factors as well as poor culture of investigative journalism in Nigeria; while measures that could be taken towards a better future

performance include legal reforms, political commitment, judicial reform and more vibrant use of the FOI Act by journalists and other members of the public alike.

Olusegun and Omotayo (2014), in their study revealed that the institutionalization of an effective democratic society anchored upon the rule of law and fundamental human rights, especially in plural societies requires many measures of which the formation of media law and institutions is one of the most crucial. Too often, this process of building media that advances democracy is undertaken without a sufficient understanding of the many and varied factors involved. Indeed, laws are frequently looked at in isolation and as interchangeable parts that are separately advocated for the creation of effective and democracy-promoting media. While Ali (2015), in the study concluded that most Africans are fast at condemning government for using state media as agents of propaganda. Politicians in the opposition parties usually cash in on this common crime by African governments while trying to score cheap political points. But government is not the only culprit when it comes to the issue of ownership and control. Private media owners have also used their media to push forward their political ambitions or that of their political parties. The media are supposed to be used as tools for propagating developmental messages and media professionals owe a duty to society to report events in their correct perspectives and not coloring it to suite particular people or organizations. In a developing continent like Africa, the mass media remain the best option for government to bring development to the public. A close partnership between governments in Africa and the mass media will help development in the continent. There is need to put an end to this cat and mouse situation and focus on progress (Ali, 2015).

The empirical review indicates that the battle for press freedom is not won as so many factors still militate the freedom of media professionals in the exercise of their duties. The Coronavirus is an epidemic that is currently ravaging the world with impact felt in every sector of the economy. With this, the role of the press is very crucial in preventing or reducing the spread of the virus as during a health crisis such as this, trusted, accurate and timely information can help communities prevent or reduce the spread of disease, and guide those affected towards services and treatment (Gunn, 2020). But then, free flow of news and information is more essential than ever, ensuring open dialogue and the exchange of vital information (International Press Institute, 2020). As during this pandemic period, a robust media environment is critical: access to life-saving information is key in the fight against the virus. As governments impose a range of restrictions in attempts to curb the pandemic, journalists help hold authorities to account by providing analysis, engaging in debate about government actions, and creating a space for dialogue about the future we all hope to see (Benedict, 2020, p. 1). According to the International Press Institute (2020), there were 426 media freedom violation cases across the globe as of the time of this study, ranging from arrest/charges, restrictions on access to information, censorship, excessive fake news regulation, and verbal or physical attacks.

Theoretical Framework

Libertarian and Social Responsibility Media Theories anchored this study. These two theories are among the first four theories of the press before McQuail added two to make them six that define how the media operate. **Libertarian media theory** for instance is second in the list of theories of the press propounded by F. S. Siebert, T. B. Peterson and W. Schramm in the year 1963. The specific principles of this theory are that: (i) publications should be free from prior

ensorship; (ii) there should be no compulsion to anything; (iii) publication of error is protected equally with that of truth in matters of opinion and belief; (iv) no restriction should be placed on the collection of information for publication provided it is done by legal means; (v) there should be no restriction on export or import or sending of messages across national frontiers; and journalists should be allowed to claim a reasonable degree of autonomy in their places of work (Daramola, 2003 in Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008). This theory, which came about as a result of the excesses in the authoritarian theory, emerged around the 17th Century and was relabeled free press theory by McQuail in 1987. The libertarian theory says humans are natural and inclined to seek truth and be guided by it. Under this theory, the people are presumed able to discern between truth and falsehood and, having been exposed to a press operating as a free marketplace of ideas and information, they will help determine public policy (Daramola, 2003 in Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008). Libertarian theory exists to check on governments and that means they should be free from governmental control. This does not mean freedom to defame or commit sedition or immunity to the rule of law and canons of civilized social conduct. The theory advocates that the press be seen as partner with government in search of truth, rather than a tool in the hands of the government (Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008).

Social Responsibility Media Theory propounded by F. S. Siebert, T. B. Peterson and W. Schramm (1963) has the following as its specific principles: (i) Media should accept and fulfill certain obligations to society; (ii) Through professional standards of informativeness, truth, accuracy, objectivity and balance, these obligations can be met; (iii) Media should regulate itself within the framework of law and established institutions to be able to carry out its responsibility; (iv) Whatever might lead to crime, violence, civil disorder or offence to minority groups, should be avoided by the media; (v) The media should reflect its society's plurality, giving access to various points of view and granting all the rights to reply; (vi) Based on the principle in (i), the society has the right to expect high standards of performance from the media. Intervention can only be justified to secure public good; and (vii) Accountability of media professionals should be to the society, employers and the market (McQuail, 1987 in Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008). The theory demands that freedom carries concomitant obligations, and the press, enjoys a privileged position under the government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying certain essential functions of mass communication. In general, socially acceptable press behaviour was to be anchored on self-regulation, but if the press would not voluntarily give them, then there must be certain social structures to ensure that it behaves in compliance with recognized social standards (Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008).

These theories are relevant to this study because they combined to demand for media freedom and liberty but with high regard to constituted social standards. Libertarian theory gives freedom to the media while social responsibility media theory patterns the exercise of that freedom among media professionals to avoid abuse of it. The press is to be seen as partner with government in search of truth, rather than a tool in the hands of the government to manipulate the public.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a multiple case study design with four cases covering the period between April, 2020 to August, 2020 to investigate how free media professional were in their reportage of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. We used the case study approach for this study because it enabled us to answer not only “what” but also “how” and “why” type questions, while taking into consideration how a phenomenon was affected by the context within which it was situated (Baxter & Jack, 2008 in Vu and Feinstein, 2017). Yin (1989) in Capraro (2016) justifies the use of case study by contrasting its purpose with other methodological choices that an experiment...deliberately divorces a phenomenon from its context, so that attention can be focused on a few variables...a history, by comparison, does deal with the entangled situation between phenomenon and context, but usually with noncontemporary events...surveys can try to deal with phenomenon and context, but their ability to investigate the context is extremely limited. Four cases relating to the phenomenon were purposively selected for investigation because they were cases tracked, assessed and authenticated by the International Press Institute (IPI) Tracker on Press Freedom Violations linked to COVID-19 coverage as cases of press or media violations in Nigeria.

DATA ANALYSIS

Case One:

Nigerian Journalist Arrested for a Story related to COVID-19

Source: Committee to Project Journalists (2020)

Saint Meinpamo Onitsha, a journalist and founder of a private Naija Live TV news website, in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state was detained by the State Security Department when he responded to summons. He was questioned about a report published on May 2 regarding the alleged collapse of a COVID-19 isolation center in Nigeria’s North Central Kogi State. He was released without charge after been forced to apologize and deny allegations of his arrest by the security agency in the press conference. Onisha was dispossessed of his mobile phones and those of his wife by the security agency and were returned to him after being released.

The full report goes:

Abuja, May 19, 2020 — Nigerian authorities should cease their intimidation of journalist Saint Mienpamo Onitsha and ensure that security forces permit the press to work freely, the Committee to Protect Journalists said today

At about 1 a.m. on May 9, four masked Department of State Services agents forced their way into the home of Onitsha, the founder of *Naija Live TV*, an independent news website, in Yenagoa, the capital of Nigeria’s Southern Bayelsa state, blindfolded him, and drove him around for more than three hours before bringing him to the department’s local headquarters, according to the journalist, who spoke with CPJ via phone and messaging app, and a report by the privately owned *Sahara Reporters* newspaper.

At the headquarters, agents interrogated Onitsha about his sources for two reports he had published, and threatened him with criminal prosecution on false news charges, according to the journalist and a report by the privately owned *Daily Independent* newspaper.

The agents held him until May 12, when Onitsha appeared at a press conference organized by the security agency, in which he apologized for his outlet's reporting and denied allegations that agents had abducted him, and he was then released without charge, he told CPJ. Onitsha said he was coerced into making those statements in exchange for being released without charge.

The Department of State Services operates under Nigeria's coordinator of national security, which reports directly to President Muhammadu Buhari, according to the National Security Agencies Act.

The officers also took five phones belonging to Onitsha and his wife when he was arrested and only returned the phones after he was released, he said, adding that he could not tell if anything was deleted from the phones or if they were tampered with.

"There is absolutely no justification for seizing journalist Saint Mienpamo Onitsha from his home in the dead of night and subjecting him to days of interrogation for his reporting," said Angela Quintal, CPJ's Africa program coordinator, in New York. "The Department of State Services is far too often involved in the arbitrary detention and intimidation of journalists in Nigeria. It's a pattern that President Buhari should act swiftly to reverse."

According to Nigeria's constitution, any person detained by authorities must be arraigned in court within 24 hours if a court is within 40 kilometers of where they are detained. Onitsha told CPJ that the Department of State Services where he was detained was across the street from Bayelsa's Federal High Court Complex.

Onitsha said the officers who took him into custody questioned him on May 10 about his sourcing for a December 2019 report alleging that a court in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, had ordered the arrest of Bayelsa Deputy Governor Lawrence Erwhudjakpo, and a May 2020 report on the alleged collapse of a COVID-19 isolation center in Nigeria's Kogi State. He said he was afraid that the agents may torture him, but said they did not.

Onitsha said he was questioned again on May 12 by a man he believed to be the Department of State Service's Bayelsa state director. Before his release, Bello Bina, a former local politician for whom Onitsha had previously worked, signed a document vowing that Onitsha would appear at the Department of State Services office whenever summoned, the journalist said.

Peter Afunaya, a spokesperson for the Department of State Services, did not respond to CPJ's calls and text messages seeking comment. Contacted by CPJ over the phone, a spokesperson for the Kogi State governor, Mohammed Onogwu, declined to comment on *Naija Live TV's* article or on Onitsha's detention, and told CPJ to contact the security forces. Doubra Atasi, a media aide to Erwhudjakpo, told CPJ that the Bayelsa deputy governor had not filed a complaint against Onitsha and that he could not comment on the matter.

Case Two:

New COVID-19 Misinformation Law used to arrest Nigerian Journalist

Source: Eze, J. (April 19, 2020)

A law in the Nigerian state of Ebonyi passed to penalize the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 and other infectious diseases was used to arrest and charge journalist, Chijioke Agwu. The reporter, a correspondent for *The Sun* newspapers, was detained on the orders of Ebonyi State Governor, David Umahi over a report he wrote about the Lassa fever, a viral illness endemic in parts of West Africa, including Nigeria. The governor accused Agwu of lying and breaking the new law – an allegation refuted by his employer.

The full report goes:

Coronavirus law used to arrest Nigerian journalist over health story

A Nigerian journalist, Chijioke Agwu, has been arrested for writing a story on Lassa fever which a state governor claims violates the state's coronavirus law.

The Ebonyi State Police Command, on Saturday afternoon, arrested the Ebonyi State correspondent of *The Sun* newspapers, on the order of Governor David Umahi, the media outfit has said.

The reporter, according to the newspaper, attended a press conference by the governor at the Government House where he was whisked away by the Chief Security Officer to the governor, and later handed over to the state's Commissioner of Police, Awosola Awotinde. The reporter is still being held by the police. It was learnt that the governor has instructed that he be charged to court.

Premium Times gathered that the governor, during the press briefing, which was aired live on the state's broadcast stations, confirmed the arrest. He said the reporter lied in a recent report he wrote on Lassa fever outbreak in the state. Report against Infectious diseases law – Governor

The Governor, during the briefing, said the reporter's actions contravened the recently passed Ebonyi State Coronavirus and other Dangerous Infectious Diseases and Related Matters Law 005 of 2020. The law was accented to by the governor on April 2.

While signing the law, the governor warned against spread of false information, quoting a part of the law. "The transmission, or dissemination through a computer system or network or otherwise, of false information regarding COVID-19 within the State and other Dangerous Infectious Diseases and or any circumstances related to or bordering on the outbreak or possible outbreak of COVID-19 within the State is hereby prohibited," he declared.

He said any person who provides false or misleading information intentionally or recklessly with a view to causing panic or disaffection amongst members of the public shall be liable under the Ebonyi State Coronavirus and other Dangerous Infectious Diseases Law, 2020, Quarantine Act,

Cap Q2 LF.N, 2004, Public Health Law, Cap 126 Laws of Ebonyi State of Nigeria 2009 and any other existing law, to a fine or imprisonment or both.

The Sun Newspaper, in a statement on its website, condemned the arrest, describing it as unfortunate. The paper noted that the head of The Sun South East Bureau, Magnus Eze, had informed the management of the arrest in a text message. "I have just been informed that Ebonyi Gov, David Umahi has ordered the arrest and prosecution of The Sun newspapers state correspondent, Chijioke Agwu, while he attended a press invitation at the Govt House. I was told that their grouse was a feature story on Lassa fever endemic in Ebonyi which centred mainly on NCDC statistics published in Daily Sun of Friday, April 17, 2020," Mr Eze's message read. The management wondered why the reporter would be arrested for doing his job.

"It is wrong to arrest a reporter for doing his job. Our correspondent was arrested as if he was a common criminal while doing his legitimate duty. It is unfortunate a governor can make such an order and a Commissioner of Police acted on it."

The paper further claimed that Mr. Umahi has a penchant for harassing journalists. "Sources say any time report on an issue in the state is published, the governor sometimes personally harasses and threatens reporters," the paper said. The paper further quoted unnamed sources as stating that "the governor does not want any report on the failure of his government reported by the media. When there is a communal clash, robbery, killings in the state, and they are reported, he gets offended. These things are replete in the state and it is the duty of the media to report them." The paper said since the arrest of the reporter, the police have barred access to him.

The Commissioner of Police, Awotinde Awosola, confirmed the arrest of the reporter. He, however, denied that the police have barred access to the reporter. "He is having a parley with my officers. We are investigating the matter," he said.

Case Three: Lockdown: Task Force attacks Delta NUJ Chairman, another Journalist

Source: Adurokiya, E. (April 1, 2020), *Nigerian Tribune* Newspaper

Officials of the Delta State Task Force on Environment attacked Michael Ikeogwu, chairman of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), and Mathew Omonighoe, correspondent of the Daily Post, as they were covering the COVID-19 lockdown. The two journalists were in the Uvwie Local Government Area of the state to monitor the stay-at-home order by the government when they were stopped by the task force officials and assaulted. Omonighoe reportedly had his Nikon D3100 camera destroyed.

Full report goes:

Officials of the Delta State Task Force on Environment on Wednesday attacked the Chairman, Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), Delta State council, Mr. Michael Ikeogwu. Also attacked was the correspondent of the *Daily Post*, Mathew Omonigho, who reportedly had his Nikon D3100 camera destroyed.

The duo were in Otio Street, Uvwie Local Government Area of the state to monitor the stay-at-home order by the government as a measure taken to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in the state.

Narrating his ordeal, Ikeogwu said that he had approached the environmental officials on why they should force residents to do sanitation despite the government order. According to him, he and his fellow journalist were held for over 45 minutes by the officials said to have been led by Mr. Kingsley Iweka. “It took the swift intervention of the Chairman of the Environment Task Force, Mr. Syvelster Oromoni, to free us from them through phone call. “I wondered what will become of the ordinary man in the society if government officials could assault journalists in this manner even after identifying ourselves. “Today is not environmental sanitation. Why should a task force constituted for environmental sanitation come out on a day that people are asked to stay at home to enforce environmental sanitation? “The action further endangers the lives of the people as it contravenes the social distance directive of the governor. “I wish to call on the state governor to look into this matter because many people will fall victim of this brutality before the end of the lockdown order. “It was the residents of the area who called us to come and see what was happening, how they were being forced to come and do environmental sanitation. However, I thank God it didn’t go beyond that even as I go to treat myself because I was attacked. “I am disappointed with the attitude of the leader of the team, who, after I had introduced myself, ordered his boys to attack me and my colleague,” he said. Ikeogwu, however, urged the state government to call the officials to order, noting that many journalists might become victims before the expiration of the two weeks lockdown of the state.

Reacting, Oromoni said that the task force gave the order that the people should come out and clean their environment. Oromoni, however, pleaded that “the matter should end there.”

In a related development, operatives of the Nigeria Police, Warri Area Command, on Wednesday, arrested a number of persons across Warri and environs for violating the lockdown and stay-at-home order. Warri Area Commander, Mohammed Garba, while addressing journalists after surveillance with his convoy, said the stay-at-home compliance was 99.9 per cent. “Today being the first day, it is normal. We recorded 99.9 per cent compliance. We have to continue patrolling as we have done at least for the 14 days.

“People have been complaining but they have to comply. It is a government directive. So, I’m appealing to them to exercise patience. Fourteen days is just like 14 hours before you know it, it is over. “That is what we are trying to make them see, they should please comply with the Federal Government and the state government’s directives. “We made some arrest for violation, though some people were saying that they were coming from other states, but that notwithstanding, we made the arrests.”

Case Four:

Nigerian journalist Kufre Carter detained for 1 month, charged with defamation and conspiracy

Source: Source: CPU Media Trust (2020)

Kufre Carter, a presenter with the privately owned XL 106.9 FM radio station, was detained and detained for one month by the officers with Nigeria's Department of State Services in Southern City of Uyo, when he responded to a summons issued the day before. The charges stem from an April 25 article published in *First Reports*, which featured the audio of a phone call between two unnamed people that was critical of Akwa Ibom State Health Commissioner Dominic Ukpog's handling of the COVID-19 crisis in the state. The charge sheet alleges that Carter "caused [the article] to be published," and that the article and recording were "false" and contained "defamatory words against" Ukpog.

The full story reads:

Nigerian authorities should drop all charges against journalist Kufre Carter and ensure that the press is not harassed by the country's security forces, the Committee to Protect Journalists said today.

On April 27, in the Southern City of Uyo, officers with Nigeria's Department of State Services arrested Carter, a presenter with the privately owned XL 106.9 FM radio station, when he responded to a summons issued the day before, according to Inibehe Effiong, Carter's lawyer, who spoke to CPJ by phone and messaging app, and reports by the privately owned *First Reports* and *Premium Times* news websites.

Authorities barred Carter's lawyer or family from visiting him during his month-long detention, and released him yesterday afternoon on bail, according to a Facebook post by Effiong, who told CPJ that he attempted to meet with Carter multiple times, but was denied by Department of State Services agents.

During his detention, on April 29, a local court charged Carter with conspiracy and defamation, according to a copy of the charge sheet, which CPJ reviewed. Those charges were not dropped when Carter was released, according to Effiong's Facebook post, which said the journalist is due back in court on June 1.

The charges stem from an April 25 article published in *First Reports*, which featured the audio of a phone call between two unnamed people that was critical of Akwa Ibom State Health Commissioner Dominic Ukpog's handling of the COVID-19 crisis in the state, according to the newspaper's report. The charge sheet alleges that Carter "caused [the article] to be published," and that the article and recording were "false" and contained "defamatory words against" Ukpog.

First Reports editor-in-chief Ita Utioh told CPJ via phone that Carter had never worked for the newspaper, and that the article in question simply reposted audio that was already circulating on social media. “In this confusing set of circumstances, two things are clear: Nigerian authorities are overreacting to criticism, and the Department of State Services is once again arbitrarily targeting a journalist,” said Angela Quintal, CPJ’s Africa programme coordinator, in New York. “Detaining Kufre Carter for one month is a violation of his basic rights. Carter should never have been detained, and the charges against him should be dropped immediately.”

In a phone conversation today, Carter told CPJ that he could not comment on the case, as it was still before the court. XL 106.9 FM is an Akwa Ibom-based radio station that airs lifestyle programme and news, entertainment, and sports coverage. Carter primarily covers sports for the station, according to *Premium Times*.

If convicted, Carter faces a maximum sentence of two years in prison for conspiracy and the same for criminal defamation, and three years’ imprisonment for the allegedly false and defamatory *First Reports* publication, according to the charge sheet and the Akwa Ibom state criminal code, a copy of which CPJ reviewed.

Carter was released after providing the court a bail bond of 200,000 naira (\$512), according to Effiong. On April 29, the court had granted Carter bail under the conditions that he provide a bond of 3 million naira (\$7,692), a letter from his community leader confirming his identity, and a senior civil servant to act as surety, but Effiong said these conditions were too difficult to meet. The requirements were revised after Effiong filed an appeal, which the prosecution is contesting, he said.

Akwa Ibom State Attorney General Uwemedimo Nwoko told CPJ by phone that the prosecution had a right to appeal Carter’s bond conditions, but declined to comment further on the case.

Reached by phone, Ukpong told CPJ that he had nothing to do with Carter’s detention and could not speak further because he was not comfortable with telephone interviews. Effiong told CPJ and posted on Twitter on April 27 that the Department of State Services director of operations for Akwa Ibom state, Uchehukwu Nnatube, had called a member of his legal team and requested that Carter’s phone be handed over so authorities could “extract” evidence, but later told CPJ that he did not hand over the phone.

When contacted by CPJ, Nnatube told CPJ that he could not comment on Carter’s case because it was before a court. For years, CPJ has documented the repeated arbitrary detention of journalists by Nigeria’s Department of State Services, which operates under the coordinator of national security, who reports directly to President Muhammadu Buhari, according to the National Security Agencies Act.

In 2019, CPJ documented how Nigeria’s military targeted journalists’ phones and computers with digital forensics technology, seeking to extract information that would reveal sources for their reporting.

Discussion

Based on the data presented, it is found that there were cases of press freedom violations by the agencies of the Nigerian government in the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic. This is evident in cases presented where freedom of journalists linked to COVID-19 pandemic was in different forms violated by the security operatives of government and the environmental tax force. For example, in case one, Saint Meinpamo Onitsha, a journalist and founder of a private Naija Live TV news website, in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state was detained by the State Security Department about a report published on May 2, 2020 regarding the alleged collapse of a COVID-19 isolation center in Nigeria's North Central Kogi State. He was released without charge after been forced to apologize and deny allegations of his arrest by the security agency in the press conference. In case two, a law in the Nigerian state of Ebonyi passed to penalize the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 and other infectious diseases was used to arrest and charge journalist, Chijioke Agwu. The reporter, a correspondent for *The Sun* newspapers, was detained on the orders of Ebonyi State Governor, David Umahi over a report he wrote about the Lassa fever, a viral illness endemic in parts of West Africa, including Nigeria. The governor accused Agwu of lying and breaking the new law – an allegation refuted by his employer. In case three, officials of the Delta State Task Force on Environment attacked Michael Ikeogwu, chairman of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), and Mathew Omonighoe, correspondent of the Daily Post, as they were covering the COVID-19 lockdown. The two journalists were in the Uvwie Local Government Area of the state to monitor the stay-at-home order by the government when they were stopped by the task force officials and assaulted. Omonighoe reportedly had his Nikon D3100 camera destroyed. While in case four, Kufre Carter, a presenter with the privately owned XL 106.9 FM radio station, was detained was detained for one month by the officers with Nigeria's Department of State Services in Southern City of Uyo, when he responded to a summons issued the day before. The charges stem from an April 25 article published in *First Reports*, which featured the audio of a phone call between two unnamed people that was critical of Akwa Ibom State Health Commissioner Dominic Ukpong's handling of the COVID-19 crisis in the state. The charge sheet alleges that Carter "caused [the article] to be published," and that the article and recording were "false" and contained "defamatory words against" Ukpong.

It implies therefore that the fights for press freedom by media organizations in Nigeria is not won yet as officials of government continue to abuse the right of journalists in the exercise of their legitimate duties. This finding aligns with the finding in the study conducted by Oberiri (2017) which reveals that Nigerian press freedom is a paradox and only exists on paper i.e. on Constitution but not in practice. This also agrees with the report by the International Press Institute (2020), which indicates that there were 426 media freedom violation cases across the globe as of the time of this study.

Another finding of this study is that press freedom violations amid COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria covered arrests of journalists by government security operatives and task force, charges, restriction on access to information, excessive fake news regulation, intimidation and physical attacks. This is evident in cases 1, 2, 3, and 4 presented where in case one, Saint Meinpamo Onitsha, a journalist and founder of a private Naija Live TV news website, in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state was arrested and detained; in case two, a law in Ebonyi passed to penalize the spread of misinformation about COVID-19 and other infectious diseases was used to arrest and charge

journalist, Chijioke Agwu, a correspondent for *The Sun* newspapers. He was detained on the orders of Ebonyi State Governor, David Umahi over a report he wrote about the Lassa fever, a viral illness endemic in parts of West Africa, including Nigeria; in case three, officials of the Delta State Task Force on Environment attacked and detained Michael Ikeogwu, Chairman of the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ), and Mathew Omonighoe, correspondent of with the *Daily Post*, for hours as they were covering the COVID-19 lockdown; while in case four, Kufre Carter, a presenter with the privately owned XL 106.9 FM radio station, was detained for one month by the officers with Nigeria's Department of State Services in Southern City of Uyo for an article published in *First Reports* on April 25, 2020 which featured the audio of a phone call between two unnamed people that was critical of Akwa Ibom State Health Commissioner Dominic Ukpong's handling of the COVID-19 crisis in the state.

This implies that amid COVID-19 pandemic, arrests, charges, restriction on access to information, excessive fake news regulation, intimidation and physical attacks are used prevent journalists from performing their legitimate watchdog functions in Nigeria. This finding agrees with the finding in the study conducted by Oberiri (2017) which indicates that there are a lot of factors in Nigeria that impedes or militates against press freedom ranging from secrecy, legal pressure, direct censorship and force among others. Similarly, International Press Institute (2020) reports that there were 426 media freedom violation cases across the globe as of the time of this study, ranging from arrest/charges, restrictions on access to information, censorship, excessive fake news regulation, and verbal or physical attacks.

Furthermore, finding revealed that press freedom violations amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria has negative impact on the ongoing effort to stem the pandemic as it prevent the public from having access to privileged and timely information that would have better assisted them in fighting the disease. This is evident in cases 1, 2, 3 and 4 studied where the arrest, attacks or detention of journalists prevented them from timely coverage or reportage of such stories and denied or delayed the public from having access to such stories. This finding justifies the provisions of the libertarian and social responsibility media theories that anchored this study which seek freedom for media professionals to enable them function effectively. And just like International Press Institute (2020, p. 1) emphasized, "free flow of news and information is more essential than ever, ensuring open dialogue and the exchange of vital information" in this COVID-19 pandemic period.

CONCLUSION

There were cases of press freedom violations by the agencies of the Nigerian government in the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic. The fights for press freedom by media organizations in Nigeria is not won yet as officials of government continue to abuse the right of journalists in the exercise of their legitimate duties. Arrests, charges, restriction on access to information, excessive fake news regulation, intimidation and physical attacks are used to prevent journalists from performing their legitimate watchdog functions amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Press freedom violations amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria has negative impact on the ongoing effort to stem the pandemic as it prevent the public from having access to privileged and timely information that would have better assist them in fighting the disease.

Conclusively, press freedom is an essential factor that strengthens media independence and enhances effective performance but the existing of certain cases of media freedom violations can limit the performance of the media as evident in this study. There should be a freer environment for the press while operating within the confine of the law and ethics of their profession amid COVID-19 for a more positive result.

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