

Nigeria's civilian regime of 2015-2021 press freedom and responsibility: A content analysis of Vanguard and the Punch newspapers

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Abstract

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) saddles the press with the herculean task of upholding the fundamental objectives of the country's constitution and holding public officers accountable to the citizens. This means that journalists and media organisations are duty bound to interact with the various agents and institutions of government, and constantly act as a check on the excesses of government and the press itself. To successfully achieve this, therefore, the press must enjoy a considerable freedom while being ethically circumspect. This study examines how Vanguard and The Punch newspapers have covered the cases of press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism since the inception of the Buhari's civilian administration. It essentially sought to determine the frequency of such newspaper reports. Using the content analysis design, the study evaluates the contents of 183 issues of Vanguard and The Punch newspapers retrieved from the Nexis Lexis database, and the results were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings show that there has been a frequent reportage of the cases of press freedom violation in Nigeria since the inception of the Buhari's civilian administration although the majority of reports focused more on the cases of media freedom violation than the cases of unethical press behavior. Also, the study recommends that government should give a greater measure of freedom to the Nigerian press, and the press should become more ethically and socially responsible to the society where they operate.

Keywords: *Press freedom, press irresponsibility, media repression, Buhari, newspapers*

Introduction

The mass media have become essential part and feature of modern society. They are crucial to the sustenance of peaceful coexistence and maintenance of mutual understanding among diverse groups and components of contemporary human society. The media of mass communication provide all sorts of information needed by members of the society to make informed decisions and set the agenda that shape the twists and turns of societal issues, determine the extent of transmission and establish the terms of reference (for such issues) as well as set the limits of debates which ultimately influence people's actions, reactions, decisions and judgments on such issues (Udoakah et al, 2014). By providing daily reports and updates on whatever goes on in the society, the mass media help to synthesize and analyse all views in the society, publicize government's

policies and programs as well as reflect the corollary opposing views of members of the society towards government activities. Thus, the mass media are strategically positioned to foster understanding among members of the usually large, heterogeneous and anonymous audience.

In carrying out these functions, journalists, who are the daily harbinger of public information, are expected to work and operate within an organized social system that recognizes and promotes freedom of expression and of the press. In its basic conceptualization, press freedom refers to the absence of prior restraint on the press and journalists in their line of duty (Tom, 2004). According to Sambe and Ikoni (2004, p. 11), press freedom focuses its attention on the unrestrained liberty to write or publish information for the consumption of the audience. There is no doubting the fact that a free press is inevitable for the creation and sustenance of a flourishing democratic government. With their diverse views and opinions on public issues, the mass media freely offer invaluable advice that enables both the government and its citizens to toe the right path leading to the greater good. Thus, Nwanne (2008) believes that a free and unfettered press is more likely to pursue the goals of national development than a docile one.

However, the issue of the enactment of an emphatic Freedom of Information Act is still a pawn in the political chessboard of politicians. The reason for sitting on such legislation may not be far-fetched from the fact that Nigerian politicians know that the enactment of such powerful pro-media, pro-people legislation will constitute an effective check on their venality. It will constitute a check because the effectuation of such legislation will demystify the secrecy which gives governance a larger than life posture. In 2015, Muhammadu Buhari was elected a civilian president, as against 1984, when he was a military ruler. During his electioneering campaign, President Buhari claimed to be a “Converted Democrat” with many mouth-watering promises, including the entrenchment of press freedom in Nigeria. This implied that the new democratic rule would not be patterned after his dictatorship era of 1983-1985 when he harassed and jailed reporters at the slightest provocation (Ben et al., 2018).

However, there have been arguments in some quarters that the Buhari’s civilian administration is living below public expectation in terms of its efforts at guaranteeing press freedom in Nigeria. While capturing the general mood of press freedom under Buhari’s administration, Tosin (2019) remarked that Nigeria of today is perhaps not the best of times to be a journalist or a civil rights activist in view of the spate of attacks on freedom of the press and speech. Farooq (2019) while agreeing with Tosin (2019) opined that “the press is worse off now than it has ever been since the restoration of civilian rule in Nigeria”. In its 2019 annual World Press Freedom Index, a Paris based media outfit, Reporters Without Borders (RWB), ranked Nigeria 120 out of 180 countries where journalists are most endangered. The report further described the Buhari’s administration as one in which journalists are molested, harassed, subjected to physical violence or denied access to information by the government officials, police and sometimes by the public.

Generally, newspapers are one of the major media platforms that reflect major societal happenings, advocate societal development and champion social change issues, including press freedom and ethical/responsible journalism (Nwosu, 2003). It is, therefore, expected that newspapers would keep track of major developments related to the issues of press freedom violation and press irresponsibility in Nigeria since the inception of the Buhari’s civilian administration. Hence, this study sets to investigate how leading Nigerian newspapers have covered the cases of Nigerian press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism under the subsisting Buhari Government using *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers as reference points.

Despite the expectation that the level of press freedom would have increased following the transition from military regime to a new democratic government, some scholars (Farooq, 2019; Tosin, 2019; Ben et al., 2018;

Momoh, 2002; Yalaju, 2001) have observed that the level of press freedom has decreased, particularly under the Muhammadu Buhari's Civilian administration. For instance, Ken (2012) has observed that the press cannot perform its role creditably well because of the shackles brought upon the press by repressive laws. In the same vein, Yalaju (2001) points out that the media do not have the right access to information. However, little research has focused on the balance between press freedom and press responsibility. As such, not much is understood with regard to press freedom and their responsibility and how newspapers cover these two issues. Thus, this study explores the balance between the two by analyzing the contents of *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers from May 29, 2015 to December 31, 2021.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine Press Freedom violation and press responsibility during the civilian administration of President Buhari by examining the contents of *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Ascertain the frequency at which cases of Nigerian Press Freedom violation are reported in *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers during the Buhari civilian administration?
2. Find out the frequency at which cases of Nigerian Press irresponsibility are reported in *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers during the Buhari civilian administration.

Research Question

1. How frequent are the cases of Press Freedom violation reported in *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers during the Buhari civilian administration?
2. How frequent are the cases of Nigerian Press Irresponsibility reported in *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers during the Buhari civilian administration?

Hypothesis

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the frequency of newspaper reports on press freedom violation,

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the frequency of newspaper press unprofessionalism and the Buhari's civilian administration

Scope

The focus of this study is on the first six years of the President Buhari's civilian administration (May 29, 2015 to December 31, 2021).

2.1.1 The Concept of Press Freedom

Press freedom, which simply refers to the absence of prior restraint on the press and journalists, is a function of the law. The level of freedom that the press enjoys in any social system is a function of what the subsisting laws allow or do not allow. Nwanne (2008, p. 123) asserts that although journalists are expected to work within the ambit of democratic laws, “the press must not be encumbered by unnecessary acts of government”. There is no doubting the fact that a free press is inevitable for the creation and sustenance of a flourishing democratic government. With their diverse views and opinions on public issues, the mass media freely offer invaluable advice that enables both the government and its citizens to toe the right path leading to the greater good. Thus, Nwanne (2008) believes that a free and unfettered press is more likely to pursue the goals of national development than a docile one.

For this reason, Sambe and Ikoni (2004, p. 11) explain that press freedom focuses its attention on the unrestrained liberty to write or publish information for the consumption of the audience. There are some basic ingredients or structural conditions for effective press freedom (Ukonu, 2005; Sambe & Ikoni, 2004; Osibanjo and Fogen, 1991). These ingredients include:

- Absence of prior or subsequent restraint.
- Freedom to gather information.
- The right not to be compelled to disclose the source of information.
- Freedom to impart (information regardless of frontiers).
- The right to receive information.
- Freedom from unreasonable punishment from what is published.
- Freedom from domination and control by publicist and advertisers.
- Allowance of meaningful competition among firms in the industry.
- Freedom to criticize the government. Any government that cannot tolerate criticism should relinquish power.
- The absence of baseless restrictions (all restriction not backed by law for public good).

The right to a free press has been a major issue since the 20th century. The issue took a prominent position in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was proclaimed and adopted by the United Nations on May 10th, 1948. Article 19 of the declaration succinctly declares that:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes the freedom to hold opinion without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers.

2.2 Empirical Studies Related to Democracy, Press Freedom and Responsibility

Ekwunife, Agbo, Ukeje, Agha and Nwachukwu (2021) examined “Press freedom and Democracy in Nigeria”. The researchers made an assessment of media coverage of anti-corruption campaigns by the Buhari administration findings revealed that the media studied and featured frequently, the issues of corruption but mostly in a positive way. The reports in the selected Newspaper Nation and Daily Trust Newspapers; were said to have lacked depth and prominence.

Binhab, Breen and Gillanders (2021) examined Press Freedom and Corruption in business-state interactions, adopting firm-level data as basis of analysis. The study concluded that “countries with greater press freedom have significantly fewer incidences of bribery involving public officials. This finding underlined the role of an independent media in government integrity.

Alashry (2021) studied "Freedom of expression and statutory limitations in Libya. The study focused on how Libyan journalists are struggling for media freedom, particularly in the context of media laws in the new constitution of 2017. Focus group discussions were done with 40 Libyan journalists. Findings indicated that some media laws did not conform to the international laws and UN treaties. The findings also revealed that journalists advocated for a change in the media laws so they subscribe to the international law.

Oztunc and Pierre (2021) while lending credence to the conclusion of Modu et al. (2019), adopted a quantitative analysis of secondary data within the context of the critical political economy of the media to analyse the obstacles to the freedom and independence of the media in the world. The study revealed that media concentration, ownership, commercial stakes and political interference are the main obstacle to media freedom and independence in the world.

Ola, Danjuma and Itsegok (2020) observed that the high trend in the level of harassment and abuse on the media during the period continued unabated. Anchoring their findings on the fact that good governance is a precondition for growth and development in a fledgling democracy such as Nigeria's, the scholars concluded that it is not yet time to celebrate for Nigerian press and Nigeria. Cohen and McIntyre (2020) analyzed "The state of Press Freedom in Uganda "In-depth interviews with Ugandan journalists were conducted and it was revealed that journalists were conducted and it was revealed that journalists face dangers if they report critically about their president. Findings suggested that Uganda is undergoing the process of journalistic domestication.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) conducted a study on "journalism, press freedom and covid-19. It was concluded that in order to keep the public informed, journalists are constantly exposed to risk, the economic impact of covid-19 may threaten journalism practice but amidst the crisis, new opportunities abound for journalism.

Cohen (2020) studied "Press Freedom in 10 African Countries ". The study utilized public opinion data from 10 countries in the sub-Saharan Africa Region and International Press rankings from Reporters without Borders properly understand both now important (or not) citizens view press freedom. Results showed clear differences in citizen beliefs about press freedom across countries, but no clear relationship between citizen beliefs and global rankings.

Kiyong, Hyeong sop, and David, (2019) examined corporate social responsibility and media freedom. Using 19,130 firm-year data covering 40 countries over the (2002-2014) period. Findings indicate that corporate social responsibility activities enhance the value of firms located only in countries where media freedom in fully guaranteed.

Adopting an essentially historical narrative, Modu, Muhammed and Mai (2019) examined the influence of press freedom and media ownership in the performance of media institutions in the United States of America and Federal Republic of Nigeria. Looking through the prism of the relevant normative theories of the press, the researchers concluded that the "United States even has provision in their law and constitution forbidding state interference in the area of information content and dissemination. In Nigeria, however, the state controls society including the mass media. In this regard, whether media are owned by public or private individuals they are only meant to serve the government in power and were forbidden to criticize the government or its functionaries.

Konneh (2019) conducted a study on "press freedom and Democracy ". Using a 17- year old panel data and exploiting numerous empirical methodologies, the research showed that it takes a combination of a nation having democratic institutions that allow journalists to operate freely without political and monetary pressures to have effects on controlling corruption.

Ahmed, Adisa, and Aliagan (2019), applied content analysis to assess Press Freedom in a Democratic society, Using, Nigerian Newspapers; Daily Trust and Guardian Newspaper from January 1- March 30th2016 (3 months) which constitute the population of the content analysis. The period of study was chosen to underline the intense fuel scarcity and Dollar devaluation and appreciation, respectively. The main concern of the researcher was to see whether this period of critical issues concerning the Government was widely reported,

especially in the front pages of the two privately owned Newspapers. In the study, the front News stories were categorized into three, positive referred to a category of news stories that showed good image of the government. Negative represented coverage that was against government and cannot be published in Government-owned Newspaper. Neutral was the last category that belonged to neither positive nor negative. The study concluded that the relationship between the Nigerian Press and the government is critical and devoid of excessive attention on journalists' repression. This finding confirms the earliest conclusion of Sani (2014).

Ndinojuo and Udoudo (2018) reviewed free press and good governance in Nigeria under the Buhari's administration, using secondary data to descriptively analyses the subject. The findings revealed that in spite of the administration's recent claim of total press freedom, no fewer than 38 Newsmen were arrested or harassed and at least one killed by gunmen with the first two years of the administration. Similarly, in a study entitled "A converted Democrat" profiling the attacks on Nigerian Journalists during Buhari's civilian regime (2015- 2017)".

Obinna (2018) analyzed "The press and Freedom of Information in Nigeria and the United States of America". The study critically examined different laws namely; Freedom of Information Act 2011 and Freedom of Information Act, 1966. The aim was to sieve-out, compare, decipher similarities and the likely effects it has on Nigeria and United States of America's environment is more predisposed to freedom of information in the Nigerian society. Data was elicited from primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisted of; the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; United States of America Constitution. While the secondary sources. Primary sources consisted of; the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; United States of America Constitution, etc. While the secondary sources included journal articles on the United States of America and Nigeria freedom of Information Act, commentaries and policy statement regarding the procedure and implementation of Freedom of Information Act, etc.

Qian, Gary (2017) examined media freedom and responsibility in South Korea. In-depth interviews with 10 journalists and 10 politicians were conducted. Findings suggested that both groups had positive appraisals of the country's media democratization. Also, using the qualitative method of research involving secondary data, Apuke (2017) explored the extent of press freedom in Nigeria and identified the formal factors against press freedom in Nigeria to include secrecy, legal pressure and direct censorship. Yet, the media have been globally acknowledged as the watchdog of the society and their monitoring information roles regarded as a critical ingredient for true democracy and good governance. Dunu (2013) argues that the "media's potential to good governance depend on the extent the media reflect and enforce the principles of good governance as an institution"

In 2016, a study on a "comparative analysis of media freedom and pluralism in the EU member states", commissioned by the European Politicians Policy Department, concluded that the democratic processes in several EU countries are suffering from systematic actions due to the absence of media pluralism.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the authoritarian theory of the press. Kunczick, (1988;46), observed that the Authoritarian Media theory, besides being the oldest of the press theories, was derived from the philosophy of absolutism, in which the 'truth' resides only in a small number of elites or 'stages', capable of exercising leadership in a kind of top-down approach. According to Mc Quail (1987:111) the term 'authoritarian' 'appropriately describes press arrangements in societies where the media first began-the Monarchies, that made the press subordinate to state power and interest of the ruling elite. The media are (here) seen as servants of state, mouthpiece of government. Any media that shared some degree of editorial independence, are censored or shutdown.

The authoritarians, within this context, justified their control as a means to protect and preserve a divinely ordained social order. Most often, under this theory the control rested in the hands of a king, who in turn granted royal license to media practitioners. The theory justifies advance censorship and punishment from externally imposed guidelines. Any undue attack on authority, deviation from official policy or offences against moral codes should be criminalized.

In contemporary times, the instruments of authoritarian control of the media, include; repressive legislation, heavy taxation, direct or subtle state control of staffing of media establishments, censorship and punitive suspension of publication. Total proscription has been employed in some real cases of media perceived as 'unfriendly' to the government of the day. In the context of Press control, the degree of authoritarianism tends to vary inversely with the level of a country's liberal democracy but directly with the level of primitive tendency of the leadership to acquire and hold on to power, as well as the degree of sycophancy and disagreement within the press itself. Media are subjected to authoritarian tendencies, under certain circumstances, in democratic regimes, particularly, in times of war and during internal and external emergencies.

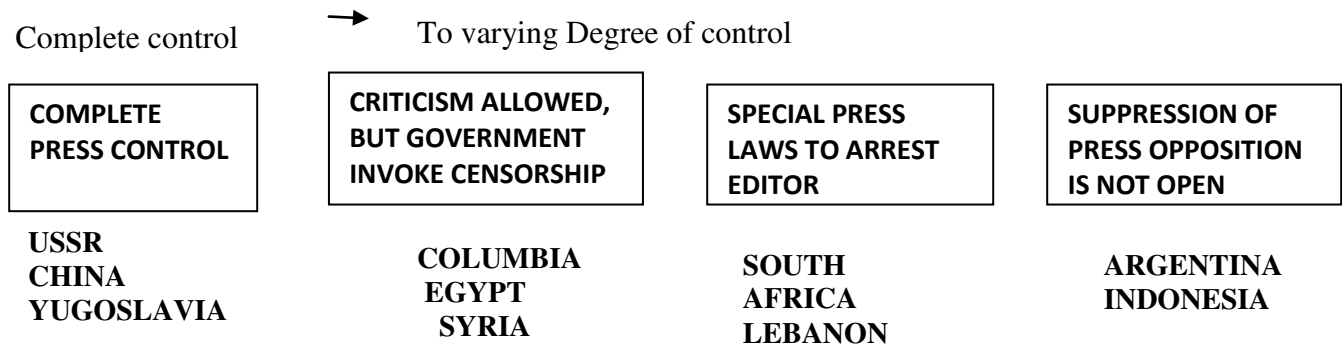


Figure 1: The figure below highlights the practice of the authoritarian theory. Source: McQuail, 2010

Research Method

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted the retrospective content analysis design. The content analysis approach is suitable for the systematic examination of the manifest contents of communication in the print media for the purpose of making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekharefo & Okpanachi, 2017).

3.2 Population of the Study

The population of this study consisted of all editions of two leading Nigerian national dailies published between May 29, 2015 to December 31, 2021 (this period captures the first six years of the Buhari's civilian administration). The selected newspapers were the *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers which were selected on the basis of their broad focus, national reach, wide patronage and frequency/consistency in reporting national issues.

3.3 Sample Size

Census sampling which is considered the most appropriate sampling approach for this study was adopted. 2,407 editions of Punch and Vanguard newspapers was used.

3.4 Sampling Technique

The study utilized the *Nexis Lexis* database which is an online data collection software essentially designed for content analytical studies. In doing this, the researcher first keyed in *Vanguard* newspaper and set the timeframe of the search from May 29, 2015 to December 31, 2021. The process was repeated for *The Punch* newspaper. Key terms such as ‘press freedom’, ‘media repression’, ‘media censorship’, ‘media unprofessionalism’, ‘media ethics’, ‘journalist attack’, and ‘press casualty’ were entered. As a rule, these terms must be found in the headlines, riders/kickers and/or lead of an articles for it to be coded as a story of interest.

3.5 Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument used in this study was the coding sheet. It was designed to show content categories as well as variables. These include;

Content Category 1: Press Freedom Violation

This refers to any situation or action that detracts from or undermines the liberty of journalists or other Nigerian workers from carrying out their legitimate professional duties. In this study, the variables under this content category are:

1. Prior restraint
2. Attacks on Personnel/organization
3. Information denial
4. Fines/bans/Warnings

Content Category 2: Irresponsibility

Irresponsibility in this context, refers to journalistic disregard of ethical conduct; this may be seen through the invasion of privacy, inaccurate reports, biased reports, etc.

1. Media bias
2. Imbalance report/coverage
3. Indecency
4. Editorial Dependence
5. Privacy Invasion

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Frequency of media reports on Nigerian Press Freedom violation from 2015 to 2021

S/N	Units of Analysis	Vanguard	Punch	Total
1	Prior Restraint	13 (23.2%)	24 (25.5%)	37 (24.7%)
2	Journalists attack	25 (44.6%)	42 (44.7%)	67 (44.7%)
3	Media repression/information denial	12 (21.4%)	18 (19.2%)	30 (20%)
4	Sanction	06 (10.7%)	10 (10.6%)	16 (10.7%)
	Total	56 (100%)	94 (100%)	150 (100%)

Source: Author's computation

Research Question 1: How frequent are the cases of Press Freedom violation reported in *Vanguard* and *Punch* newspapers during the Buhari civilian administration?

The results presented in Table 1 shows that there have been incessant cases of newspaper reports on the violation of Nigeria’s press freedom since the wake of the President Buhari’s civilian administration, and the majority of the articles were on premeditated attacks on journalist and media organisations. According to the results out of the total 150 *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspaper articles analysed for the current study, the largest chunk of the stories (N = 67, 44.7%) were about unprovoked and premeditated attacks on journalists and media organisations in the line of duty, about 37 (24.7%) centered on prior restraint against the exercise of press freedom by media workers and the general Nigerian citizens, 30 (20.0%) revolved around media repression/information denial, while the remaining 16 (10.7%) articles centered on sanctions against journalists and media organisations in the course of performing their constitutional roles.

With respect to the specific coverage by each of the investigated newspapers, the data presented in Table 1 also showed that *The Punch* newspaper published a higher number of articles on the violation of press freedom in Nigeria since the inception of the President Buhari’s civilian administration. Thus, while *Vanguard* newspaper published 13 (23.2%) articles on prior restraint, 25 (44.6%) on journalist’s attack, 12 (21.4%) on media repression/information denial and 6 (10.7%) on sanctions meted on journalists and/or media organisations, *the Punch* newspaper published a total of 24 (25.5%) articles on prior restraint, 42 (44.7%) on attack against journalists, 18 (19.2) on media repression/information denial and 10 (10.6%) on sanctions that violated the tenets of press freedom in Nigeria.

Table 2: Frequency of media reports on Nigerian Press irresponsibility from 2015 to 2021

S/N	Units of Analysis	Vanguard	The Punch	Total
1	Media Bias	02 (11.8%)	03 (18.8%)	05 (15.2%)
2	Imbalance Reportage	04 (23.5%)	07 (43.8%)	11 (33.3%)
3	Indecency	03 (17.7%)	02 (12.5%)	05 (15.2%)
4	Editorial Dependence	08 (47.1%)	04 (25.0%)	12 (36.4%)
	Total	17 (100%)	16 (100%)	33 (100%)

Source: Author’s computation

Research Question 2: How frequent are the cases of Nigerian Press irresponsibility reported in *Vanguard* and *Punch* newspapers during the Buhari civilian administration?

According to the data presented in Table 2, cases of perceived unprofessionalism of the Nigerian press were not frequently reported in the period under review given that the newspapers only reported a total of 33 articles, representing about 18.0% of all the analysed articles published by *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers within the period under review. Of all the published articles on Nigerian press unprofessionalism, the majority of articles focused on issues of editorial dependence (N = 12, 36.4%) and imbalance reportage (N = 11, 33.3%). Other related issues were media bias (N = 5, 15.2%) and indecent coverage (N = 5, 15.2%).

When disaggregated, a total of 2 (11.8%) of the articles on Nigerian press unprofessionalism published by *Vanguard* newspaper were on media bias, 4 (23.5%) focused on imbalance reportage, 3 (17.7%) discussed indecent coverage by media, while the largest chunk (N = 8, 47.1%) focused on the issue of editorial dependence among journalists and media organisations. On the other hand, *The Punch* newspaper published

3 (18.8%) articles on media bias, 7 (43.8%) on imbalance reportage, 2 (12.5%) on indecency and 4 (25.0%) on editorial dependence.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis one: There is no significant difference in the frequency of newspaper reports on press freedom violation, press irresponsibility and the Buhari’s civilian administration

Table 3: Chi Square Test on the frequency of newspaper reports press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism (2015-2019)	
	Press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism
Chi-Square	74.803 ^a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 91.5.

Table 4: Frequency of newspaper reports press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism (2015-2019)

Observed N	Expected N	Residual
150 (82.0%)	91.5	58.5
33(18.0%)	91.5	-58.5
183 (100%)		

A Chi-Square goodness of fit was calculated to compare the frequency of newspaper reports on press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism since the inception of the Buhari’s civilian administration. It was hypothesized that the frequency of newspaper reports on both issues would not vary significantly. Contrarily, the results presented in Table 4.8 indicate that there was a significant difference in the reportage of press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism within the period under review ($\chi^2(1, N = 183) = 74.803, p < 0.05$). As shown in Table 4.9, the frequency of newspaper reports on press freedom violation ($N = 150, 82.0%$) was significantly higher than the total frequency of reports on press unprofessionalism ($N = 33, 18.0%$). Hence, the assumption of hypothesis one, which stated that there is no significant difference in the frequency of newspaper reports on press freedom violation, press unprofessionalism and the Buhari’s civilian administration, was rejected.

Discussion of Findings

In a truly free society, press freedom and press responsibility are considered as twin pillars that are critical to the sustenance of people’s fundamental rights, given that virtually all indices of human rights are tacitly couched in the affordances of freedom of speech and of expression (Okoro & Okolie, 2004). Thus, any

unwanted violation of such rights by the government and/or its agents could significantly undermine society's growth and downplay people's aspiration towards liberty. Similarly, unchecked acts of irresponsibility could thwart society's progress and subsume mankind in a greater trouble than would the barrel of guns. It was in the light of this that this study critically investigated the dynamics of media reports on the cases of press freedom violation and press irresponsibility in Nigeria since the inception of the Buhari's civilian administration, using the contents of two leading Nigerian newspapers (*Vanguard* and *the Punch*) as the materials of analysis.

Findings from this study showed that there have been many cases of violation of press freedom in Nigeria during the period, and the cases were found to be in a progressive order with the least cases recorded in 2015 and the highest in 2021. Considering that most of the cases involved the government and/or its representatives, it would be safe to infer that the relationship between the press and government has been taking a downward plunge since the inception of the Buhari's civilian regime. Ironically, the Buhari's government rode into power on the crest of many far-reaching promises, including the guarantee of free speech and press freedom. It was, therefore, less surprising that only paltry cases of media abuse by government and/or its representative were recorded in 2015 and 2016 which marked the early years of the government.

However, as the years progressed and the press became more critical of the government, the number of such unpleasant cases soared and the press inevitably suffered as shown by data presented in the results section. This finding lends credence to the conclusion of Ola et al. (2020) who observed that the Buhari's administration lacks the willingness to inject a new life in the national political arena, especially in the areas of press freedom and freedom of speech. This assertion is further buttressed by the many unchecked cases of press freedom violation in Nigeria. For instance, in April 2017, a Chief Security Officer attached to President Buhari, Bashir Abubakar, reportedly expelled and confiscated the accreditation tag of *The Punch* correspondent, Lekan Adetayo, and subsequently barred him from covering the presidential villa. Adetayo's only offence was a perceived 'injurious' report he wrote on an accidental discharge from a security personnel that left a female official of the Villa in grave danger. Despite public outcry against the development, this ignoble practice seems to have become a frequent occurrence in Presidential Villa and other parts of the country.

More sadly, the findings of this study showed that the majority of the reported cases of press freedom violation were about unprovoked and premeditated attacks on journalists and media organisations in the line of duty, with about 44.7% of all the analysed articles on press freedom violation detailing how journalists were killed, physically assaulted or literally disappeared without trace after publishing reports that did not serve the parochial interest of the political class. This finding also aligns with previous research which found that the Buhari's civilian administration is marked by indiscriminate arrests and attacks on journalists and media houses, with at least 189 of such cases since 2015 (Ndinojuo & Udouo, 2018; Tosan, 2019). The current study also indicated that other similar indicators of press freedom violation during the Buhari's civilian administration were prior restraint against the exercise of press freedom by media workers and the general Nigerian citizens, media repression/information denial as well as sanctions against journalists and media organisations in the course of performing their constitutional roles.

While it should be noted that not all instances of press freedom violation were directly perpetrated by the government and/or its agents, the government, nonetheless, tends to create the enabling environment for the violation of such freedom. This is evident in the introduction and sustenance of some obnoxious laws, such as the official secrets acts, social media regulation, the Evidence Act, the Public Complain Commission Act, the Statistics Act, among others which specifically seek to hamper people's access to public information and stifle

the press (Apuke, 2017). For example, while appearing before the House Committee on Information and National Orientation in October 2020, Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, Mr. Lai Mohammed sturdily argued that Nigeria must evolve a repressive social media law that controls what citizens say online. According to him, "we need a social media policy that will regulate what should be said and posted and what should not. We also need technology and resources to dominate our social media space". It was, therefore, not a surprise that, as a follow up to this policy, the Buhari government amended the National Broadcasting Code during which it summarily increased the fine for hate speech from five hundred thousand Naira (N500,000) to five million Naira (N5,000,000) as part of strategies to muzzle press freedom. The situation in Nigeria is contrary to what obtains in the freer societies of the west, like the United States of America, where Congress is expressly forbidden from making any laws that abridge the freedom of expression and of the press (Ufuophu-Biri, 2006; Modu et al., 2019).

Observably, the Nigerian government has consistently shown a penchant to introduce and defend laws that could severely impact public communication in virtually all ramifications (Oztunc & Pierre, 2021). This unpleasant development is further aided by the series of contradictory legal and constitutional restraints that fetter the press on all sides. Arguably, the Nigerian press is saddled with the responsibility of upholding the fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy contained in sections 13 to 24 of the 1999 constitution; however, the press (publicly touted as the fourth estate of the realm) lacks the requisite constitutional backing to assert such rights when challenged by agents of the state. The result is that while the constitution grants some rights to the press (as indeed every Nigerian) in Section 39 (1) and (2), it contrarily detracts from those rights in Section 39 (3) and Section 45, thus turning the Nigerian press to a lapdog that looks free but everywhere in manacles (Ufuophu-Biri, 2006). The imbroglio of the Nigerian press is further worsened by the fact that the legislative arm (which makes the laws of the land) and the judicial arm (that interprets the laws) have both been carpeted by the executive arm, making it somewhat difficult for the Nigerian press to freely operate without undue violation and repression. As posited by Okoro and Okolie (2004, p.58):

The third organ of governance is presently confused and through unrestrained and reckless granting of injunctions and motion for counter-injunctions, had made itself a laughing stock. The independence of the judiciary has been fundamentally vitiated as both the organ and the legislative arm operate basically as bureaucracies under the burgeoning power of the executive. The rule of law has been fundamentally vitiated as the executive arm now bestride the political landscape like a colossus, intimidating, suppressing and pauperizing the masses in the most vicious manner. The end to the blatant abuse of the law is still not in sight as the masses now live in fear and state of hopelessness.

Furthermore, the study investigated the frequency of newspaper reports on Nigerian press unprofessionalism and found that unlike the issue of press freedom violation, there were limited number of newspaper reports on the unethical and irresponsible acts of journalists and media organisations, with only about 18.0% of all the analysed stories focusing on press irresponsibility and ethical issues. As shown by the result of hypothesis one, the number of stories on press irresponsibility was significantly lower than the number published for press freedom violation. This suggests that while the analysed newspapers were busy at investigating government performances in relation to the media, they failed to beam the search light on the media itself.

No, doubt, there are some ethical challenges that beset journalists and media organisations in Nigeria. Some of these challenges include media bias, imbalance reportage, bribery/brown envelop syndrome, moonlighting, Afghanistanism, fairness and objectivity questions, among others (Nwanne, 2014; Okunna,

2003). It will suffice to state that despite the importance of a free press in to the society, the activities of journalists and media organisations cannot be totally left unregulated. To achieve this, the media must watch over itself and hold itself responsible and accountable to the society within which it operates. As aptly captured by Mahatma Ghandi, the press is a great power, and like an unchained torrent submerges a whole country and devastates crops, so does an irresponsible press (Nwanne, 2014). The journalism profession is one guided by ethics, conscience and code of conduct. Therefore, to be unethical in journalism is to abuse the power of the mass media as the most potent tools for the dissemination of ideas and information in the modern world. Moreover, since journalists serve the public directly, they should be accountable to the public for their behaviors (Okunna, 2003).

Conclusion and Recommendation

Press freedom and media adherence to ethical practices are crucial to the continuous growth and development of any society. More so, freedom of the press is widely regarded as the most effective thermometer for gauging the level of other indicators of fundamental human rights that exist in a given democratic society. Nonetheless, the crave for a free press can only be pursued within the prism of media responsibility and ethical practices that will enable the press hold both the government and itself accountable to the public and responsible for their actions and inactions.

Thus, this study examined how leading Nigerian newspapers have covered the cases of press freedom violation and press unprofessionalism since the inception of the Buhari's civilian administration which came into effect on May 29, 2015. It essentially sought to determine the frequency at which both issues were reported by the Nigerian press, the main journalistic genres and the direction of such reports as reflected in the contents of two leading Nigerian newspapers- *Vanguard* and *The Punch*.

Relevant studies on press freedom violation, media ethics/responsibilities and the government-media relations in Nigeria were reviewed with emphasis on the Buhari's administration with a view to establishing a theoretical nexus and knowledge gap for the study which was hinged on three normative theories (the Authoritarian theory, Libertarian or free press theory and Social responsibility theory). The content analysis research design was adopted and a total of 226 newspaper articles were collected from *Vanguard* and *The Punch* newspapers using an online data collection technique. The analyses were, however, based on 183 articles that were directly related to the issues of discourse.

The collected data were analysed using the descriptive statistics of tabulated frequency counts and simple percentage as well as inferential statistical tools of Chi-Square goodness of fit. The results were presented in tables for enhanced comprehension. It was found that cases of press freedom violation in Nigeria have been frequently reported in newspapers since the inception of the Buhari's civilian administration, and the newspapers focused more on the cases of media freedom violation than the cases of unethical or irresponsible press behavior. Essentially, the study found that newspaper reports on press freedom violation and press irresponsibility were reported as straight news and negativity was the principal discursive elements that resonated in the majority of articles on both issues.

Based on the findings made in this study, it can be concluded that cases of press freedom violation and press irresponsibility have been frequently reported in newspapers since the inception of the Buhari's civilian administration; however, the majority of such newspaper reports were focused on the violation of press freedom by government and/or its agents, while cases of press irresponsibility/unethical practices were inadequately reported within the period under review. Despite the promise of increased support for a free press, the Buhari's administration is replete with many cases of attacks on journalists and media

organisations, media repression, prior censorship/restraint and sanction over media comments on public issues which aimed at gagging the press and inhibiting free speech.

In the light of the findings made in this study, it is recommended that;

- There is a strong need for the Nigerian government, particularly the Buhari's civilian administration, to stop all premeditated attacks on journalists and media organisations and see the press as partner in the quest for national development and societal growth.
- The endless attempt at press repression, attacks and sanctions on media personnel would only do more harm than good to the government.
- The press should go beyond the role of holding government responsible and accountable to the people and extend its focus to the equally important role of holding itself accountable for its actions. By this, journalists and media organisations should beam the searchlight on the practices of media professionals with a view to unearthing unethical or irresponsible practices among members of the fourth estate of the realm. By regulating itself and becoming more responsible and receptive to the yearning of the society, the press will regain public confidence and etch an impeccable integrity in the heart of many.
- The media should sustain and consolidate on the frequency of reporting cases of press freedom violation by the government and its agent in order to bring the issue to the fore and trigger appropriate mechanisms to curtail such ugly trend.

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