

Analysing Press Freedom during President Muhammadu Buhari Second Term (2019-2023)

Hassan Biodun Suleiman

Department of Journalism and Media Studies,

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, Lagos State University.

Hassan.suleiman@lasu.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

This study examined press freedom during President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019 to 2023). The study employed the quantitative method with content analysis as the research instrument. Drawing from a purposive sampling method, three widely circulated national daily newspapers, namely Daily Trust, The Sun and The Punch were selected for analysis; a total of 135 editions from the years 2021, 2022 and 2023, representing the entirety of Buhari's second term, were examined. The study attempted to identify press freedom violations, ascertain the newspapers reporting such violations and determine the government agencies and institutions most directly implicated in such infringements. The findings of the study revealed a prevalence of press freedom violations throughout Buhari's second term. Notably, censorship of the press emerged as a significant issue, with assaults, harassment and intimidation against journalists featuring prominently. There were also the denial of access to information and instances of kidnapped journalists underscoring the multifaceted challenges facing press freedom in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Press Freedom, Newspaper, Journalists, Free Speech, Violation, Government*

INTRODUCTION

The examination of press freedom under President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019-2023) marks a critical period in Nigeria's democratic journey, with implications for the protection of free speech, media independence, and the overall health of the country's democracy. Though human rights are naturally and entitled to all, the term has become highly politicised and the definition has changed to include “fundamental rights, especially those believed to belong to an individual and in whose exercise a government may not interfere, as the rights to speak, associate and

work. Nevertheless, before, during, and after an election, journalists are crucial to the information-sharing process (Adegboyega, 2020). Scholars have long underscored the significance of press freedom in fostering democratic societies. McChesney (2004) argued that robust and independent media serves as the "watchdog of democracy," playing a vital role in exposing corruption, promoting accountability, and safeguarding citizens' right to information.

Against this backdrop, the examination of press freedom in Nigeria during President Buhari's second term is essential for assessing the state of democracy and governance in the country. Previous research has highlighted challenges facing the Nigerian media, including government censorship, intimidation of journalists, and restrictive laws that undermine press freedom (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). In line with the above, it is important to analyse the extent to which these challenges have persisted under Buhari's administration (2019 – 2023). Thus, this study attempted to examine press freedom in Nigeria during President Buhari's second term, essentially on media independence, censorship, journalists' safety and legal frameworks impacting the media landscape.

Research Questions

1. What are the specific cases of press freedom violations during President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019-2023)?
2. Which of the Nigerian newspapers has the highest number of cases of press freedom violations during President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019-2023)?
3. Which of the government agencies are responsible for carrying out the attacks on the press during President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019-2023)?

Press Freedom in Nigeria

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has highlighted instances of harassment, intimidation, and violence against journalists in Nigeria, with many cases going unresolved. The Freedom House's Freedom of the Press report has also noted a decline in press freedom in Nigeria, citing issues such as regulatory restrictions, censorship, and self-censorship among media practitioners. Akinwale (2010) affirms that numerous news outlets have made the public aware of the appalling conditions in Nigerian society. They have exposed problems ranging from crime and poverty to poor roads and other flaws in Nigerian towns through critical journalism (Ukaegbu 2007).

The Federal Republic of Nigeria's 1999 constitution states in section 22 that "the press, radio, television, and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in the chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government to the people." As noted by Arikewuyo, Adisa, and Aliagan (2019), "Every person including the press shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference." Notwithstanding all of the constitutional provisions, there isn't any clear indication of distinctive protections that allow the press to carry out its constitutional obligations without interference. Section 45 of the Nigerian constitution restricts the rights granted to the press in Section 39 of the 1999 constitution (as modified), specifically stating that any law reasonably justified in a democracy may annul the press's function as outlined in Section 22.

Essentially and for this study, press freedom includes but is not limited to attack, harassment and intimidation of practising journalists in the process of carrying out their lawful duty, closure of media houses, levy of financial charges on media houses for contravening existing code of ethics, unlawful arrests, banning of journalists from covering selected government activities, imprisonment of journalists, torturing, shaving of hair of journalists, forceful removal from coverage of a particular beat, killing, jailing, purported involvement of journalist in coup and counter-coup, going on exile by journalists, declaration of journalist wanted by the government, denial of access to government information sources and the likes.

President Buhari's Second Term

The second term of Buhari's administration took off on May 29, 2019. Buhari emerged as the winner after defeating the PDP presidential candidate in a contested general election. He was eventually sworn in on 29 May 2019. Since then, the state of press freedom in Nigeria has been a subject of debate and concern. While the media landscape in Nigeria remains diverse and dynamic, challenges such as regulatory restrictions, censorship, and harassment continue to pose significant threats to press freedom.

Several studies have been conducted to analyse the state of press freedom in Nigeria under President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019-2023). This period has been marked by various challenges and controversies regarding the freedom of the press in the country. Researchers have investigated the extent to which media freedom was respected and protected during the time, as well as the implications for democracy and governance in Nigeria.

Akinwale (2010) found that despite the press's role in helping democracy grow, press freedom faced several obstacles. It was noted that the press defined norms and established principles for proper public behaviour in addition to providing information, entertainment, and education to the public. The results demonstrated that should the Freedom of Information Bill (FIB) become law and be put into effect; it will strengthen press freedom and advance democracy in Nigeria. Arikewuyo *et al.* (2019) found out that aside from the partisanship of the connection between the Nigerian government and the press, there is a critical interaction between the press and the current democratic administration, with very little focus on the suppression of journalists. Additional research showed that the press is notably free because it regularly covered 57.6% and 74.1% of stories deemed important to the government by emphasising them on the front pages of the nation's major newspapers.

Suntai, Agbu & Targema (2018) examined the relationship between the media and the state under the current democratic dispensation. The resulting argument and supporting data serve to illustrate that despite occasional conflicts between the media and state forces, the current democratic experiment places a high value on freedom of expression. Nevertheless, the study contends that the abuse of social media opportunities, in conjunction with the current rise in hate speech, is driving the state to the limit.

Theoretical Framework

Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility Theory posits that the media must serve the public interest by providing accurate, unbiased information and promoting democratic values. Folarin (1998) posits that the main duty of the media operating with this theory is to raise conflict to the plane of discussion. In principle, the media can be used by anyone who has an idea to express but is forbidden to invade private rights or disrupt vital social structures or interests. Scholars like Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) argue that the press should act as a watchdog, holding those in power accountable and safeguarding the public's right to know.

Perhaps, contrary to the impression one gains from the products of Western scholarship (Siebert *et al.* (1956) & Folarin (1998) affirm that Social Responsibility Theory is not a theory for the Western Press alone but for the press in all responsible societies. Quite naturally, the interpretation and implementation of the theory's tenets will vary in line with any given social milieu. Thus, this theory can be used to assess how well the Nigerian media performs in maintaining journalistic standards

and carrying out its function as a check on government authority during President Buhari's second term.

METHOD

This is a content analysis research. This study analysed the freedom of the press under President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019-2023). The study is a descriptive quantitative content analysis with coding and analysing the content of newspaper reports and other genres on press freedom in Nigeria during President Buhari's second term in office.

The sampling method utilised in this research is purposive sampling, where specific media sources and materials were selected based on their relevance to the topic under investigation. The researcher selected three (3) national dailies, which are *Daily Trust*, *The Sun* and *The Punch* newspapers that were in circulation during PMB's second term from 2019 to 2023. These three newspapers were selected based on their large circulation and geographical locations or regions. Thus, the researcher selected the years 2021, 2022 and 2023.

Additionally, using a month composite sample whereby a selection is made at every 3-month interval (1/3 of a year), the researcher selected four (4) months from the total 12 months to represent each of the years 2021, 2022 and 2023, which were the years of PMB's second term. The selected months were March, June, September and December.

Again, using the composite week to represent each of the four (4) selected months in analysing the contents of the three (3) selected newspapers, only the editions published on March 7th to 11th, June 18th to 22nd, September 25th to 29th, and December 1st to 5th were analysed, excluding the year 2023 in which only editions published on March 7th to 11th were analysed as the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari's second term ended on May 29, 2023. Thereby making it a total number of sixty (120) published editions in the years 2021 and 2022 and fifteen (15) published editions in the year 2023 of the three selected publications representing the second 4-year tenure of PMB. One hundred and thirty-five (135) editions of the three (3) selected newspapers for the four (4) selected months served as the sample size of this study.

The unit of analysis for this study equally consists of press releases, features, editorials, news, tone, the direction of the news story, and prominence among others. The selection of specific media sources was based on their prominence, credibility, and coverage of press freedom issues during the specified time frame. A coding guide and coding sheet were used for this study to identify the contents of the

selected newspapers. The coding guide and coding sheet assisted in standardising the instrument for data gathering.

The method of data collection for this study involved systematically reviewing and analysing media reports, articles, and press materials related to press freedom in Nigeria during President Buhari's second term. Simple tables, frequencies and percentages were adopted in the presentation and analysis of the data generated for this study. The results were presented in tabular form. Necessary explanations were made after each table and analysis of the data collected for clarity. In accomplishing all analysis details with efficiency and effectiveness, the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software, version 27, was used by the researcher.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1: Specific Cases of Press Freedom

Cases of Press Freedom	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Assaults/Harassment of Journalists	17	13.4
Arrest and Detention	4	3.1
Denial of access to government house	6	4.7
Denial of access to information	7	5.5
Censorship	22	17.3
Draconian legislation	6	4.7
Executive order	6	4.7
Banning of Social Media space	6	4.7
Withdrawal of licence	4	3.1
False charges (treason) against journalists	7	5.5
Death threat	1	.8
Harsh policy/codes	2	1.6
Legal restrictions	5	3.9
Intimidation of media organisation	14	11.0
Killing/Murdering of journalist	3	2.4
Missing/Kidnapping of journalist	10	7.9
Others	7	5.5
Total	127	100.0

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2024

The table 1 presents the different categories of press freedom violations reported by the three selected newspapers. Data revealed censorship was the most frequently

reported issue (17.3%), followed by assaults/harassment of journalists (13.4%). This implies that censorship and assaults/harassment were significant concerns regarding press freedom as reported and analysed.

Table 2: Frequency of Reports

Newspaper	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily Trust	36	28.3
The Sun	39	30.7
The Punch	52	40.9
Total	127	100.0

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2024

Table 2 shows the distribution of the selected newspapers that covered the cases of press freedom during President Buhari's second term. The table indicates that out of 127 cases found and analysed, 28.3% were from *Daily Trust*, 30.7% from *The Sun*, and 40.9% which is the majority were reported by *The Punch*. This implies that *The Punch* newspaper had the highest percentage among the newspapers analysed for this study.

Table 3: Tone of Report

Tone	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Positive	45	35.4
Negative	70	55.1
Neutral	12	9.4
Total	127	100.0

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2024

Table 3 indicates the distribution of the tone of the reports analysed. The data show that 55.1% of the reports had a negative tone, while 35.4% had a positive tone. This implies that a majority of the reports had a critical or negative tone.

Table 4: Prominence of Report

Prominence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Frontpage	18	14.2
Inside page	105	82.7
Central spread	4	3.1
Total	127	100.0

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2024

Table 4 reveals the prominence of the press freedom reports analysed, with 82.7% of them being on the inside pages. This indicates that the majority of the cases of press freedom violations or reports were not featured on the front page but rather inside the newspapers.

Table 5: Government Agencies/Institutions Responsible for Violations

Perpetrators	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Nigerian Police Force	16	12.6
Nigerian Armed Forces	8	6.3
Paramilitary	4	3.1
Ministry of Information	24	18.9
Ministry of Justice	4	3.1
National Assembly/State Assembly	17	13.4
National Broadcasting Commission	8	6.3
Others	46	36.2
Total	127	100

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2024

Table 5 identifies the government agencies/institutions responsible for press freedom violations. The data show that the Ministry of Information (18.9%) and the National Assembly/State Assembly (13.4%) were among the top perpetrators. This implies that government bodies were significantly involved in violations against press freedom.

Table 6: Motives/Reasons for Violation

Motives/Reasons for Violation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Boost the personality of the perpetrator involved	4	3.1
Suppress the truth	37	29.1
Neutralise claims against perpetrator	38	29.9
Attack the credibility of the report	16	12.6
Violation of the constitutional provisions	8	6.3
Unethical practice/Misconduct of journalists	12	9.4
Opposition based	8	6.3
Others	4	3.1
Total	127	100.0

Source: Newspaper Analysis, 2024

Table 6 outlines the motives or reasons behind press freedom violations. The data indicates that suppressing the truth (29.1%) and neutralizing claims against perpetrators (29.9%) were the most common motives reported. This suggests that influencing narratives and protecting the interests of perpetrators were key reasons for press freedom violations.

The first question was to provide answer for the specific cases of press freedom violations during President Muhammadu Buhari's second term (2019-2023). Table 1 shows that the majority of the newspapers analysed for this study identified that maximum coverage was given to censorship and assaults, Intimidation of media organisations, denial of access to information and kidnapping of journalists were frequently reported.

The findings for the second question (see Table 2) revealed that 127 press freedom cases were found and analysed in which most of the identified cases were reported in a negative tone. Punch was discovered to have the highest number of reported cases followed by the *Daily Trust*, and *The Sun*, respectively. The findings also revealed further the level to which prominence was given to these press violation stories as revealed in Table 4 above that most of the cases of press freedom violations or reports were not featured on the front page but rather inside the newspapers.

The findings for the third question of the study revealed that the Ministry of Information and the National Assembly/State Assembly were among the top perpetrators of violating the freedom of the press (see Table 5). The social responsibility hypothesis, on the other hand, calls on the media to present accurate accounts of events while also taking into consideration the effects that their reporting may have on societal progress and peace. This study finds that The Punch newspaper has the highest number of reported cases of press freedom violations as revealed in Table 2. This study shows that the federal Ministry of Information (18.9%) is noted to be the major perpetrator of violations against journalists and media professionals. Others include the National Assembly/State Assembly (13.4%) and others during the second tenure of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration.

CONCLUSION

The study found that there were high cases of press freedom abuse under Buhari's administration and this is not good for a democratic nation. The study reveals that there were high cases of press freedom abuse manifesting in censorship which

includes suppression of information, assaults, Intimidation of media organisations, denial of access to information and kidnapping of journalists as revealed in Table 1.

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APPENDIX A
CODING GUIDE FOR ANALYSING THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS DURING
PRESIDENT MUHAMMADU BUHARI'S SECOND TERM (2019-2023)

CASE IDENTIFYING DETAILS

CASE NO.: **EDITION (dd/mm/yy):** _____

HEADLINE: _____

NEWSPAPER

Daily Trust (1) The Sun (2) The Punch (3)

MONTH

March (1) June (2) September (3) December (4)

TYPE OF STORY/REPORT

News (1) Editorials (2) Column/Opinion (3) Interview (4) Features/News
analysis (5) Letter/Earpiece (6) Advertisement (7) Photo story (8) others (9) _____

SPECIFIC CASE OF PRESS FREEDOM

Assaults/Harassment of Journalists	01
Arrest and Detention	02
Denial of access to Government House	03
Denial of access to information	04
Censorship	05
Draconian legislation	06
Executive order	07
Banning of Social Media Space	08
Withdrawal of licence	09
False charges (treason) against journalists	10
Death threat	11
Denial of access to proper medical care	12
Denial of access to a lawyer for proper representation/fair hearing	13
Harsh Policy/Codes	14
Legal Restrictions	15
Intimidation of media organisation	16
Killing/Murdering of Journalist	17
Missing/Kidnapping of Journalists	18
Others (Specify)_____	19

tone of report

Positive	01
Negative	02
Neutral	03

Prominence of report

Frontpage	01
Inside page	02
Central spread	03
Back page	04

Government agencies/institutions responsible for violations

Nigerian Police Force	01
Nigerian Armed Forces	02
Paramilitary	03
State Security Services (DSS/SSS)	04
Judiciary	05
Ministry of Information	06
Ministry of Justice	07
National Assembly/State Assembly	08
National Broadcasting Commission	09
Others (Specify)_____	10

Motives for violations

Boost personality of the perpetrator involved	01
Suppress the truth	02
Neutralise claims against perpetrator	03
Opposition based	04
Attack credibility of the report	05
Unfounded claims/unverified reports	06
Violation of the constitutional provisions	07
Unethical practice/Misconduct of journalists	08
Secrecy	09
Others (Specify)_____	10