

**CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS AND PROTECTION OF ONLINE PRESS
FREEDOM IN NIGERIA, 2015-2019**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the link between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and protection of online press freedom in Nigeria. It specifically focused on the role of CSO in advocating for greater online freedom for journalists and protection of their lives in an illiberal democracy like Nigeria where government continuously tries to suppress the media to avoid negative reporting. The framework of analysis is based on the concept of illiberal democracy developed by Fareed zakaria and we adopted a mixed method of data collection. The study found that public consciousness has increased on the importance of a free media in Nigeria as a result of the efforts of CSOs but a lot still needs to be done to improve Nigeria's ranking and status as a partly free nation when it comes to press and internet freedom. Also, the study found out that while CSOs' advocacy strategy has helped secure the release of online journalists detained arbitrarily, a lot still needs to be done to advance online press freedom in Nigeria. Thus, the study recommends that there is need for more collaboration between CSOs and democratic groups to advocate for the promotion of a democratic project in Nigeria that prioritizes economic prosperity of the citizens and sees it as inextricably linked to political freedom. The importance of promoting liberal democratic tenets in post-colonial authoritarian and illiberal states like Nigeria is imperative for ensuring online press freedom.

Keyword: Civil Society Organizations, Internet Freedom, Press Freedom, Illiberal Democracy and Advocacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Freedom of expression is one of the hallmarks of any democratic society and it is for this reason that it is constitutionally guaranteed in every known democracy. The implication of the above statement is that the existence of true democracy in the 21st century without freedom of expression is unimaginable. Freedom of expression is the right to express one's ideas and opinions freely through speech, writing, and other forms of communicating, but without deliberately causing harm to others character and/or reputation by false and misleading statements. This definition provided by Business Dictionary shows that freedom of the press is part of freedom of expression.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) recognized the right to free expression of oneself as a human right. The article states that "everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference" and everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression;

this right shall include the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice”. Although, freedom of expression is a *sine qua non* in a democracy, its regulation is deeply divisive and contentious. People must be able to talk freely via any communication channel of their choice and receive information without fear or hindrance for the purpose of being active citizens in the democratic process (Malo 2016). However, this right is not absolute as it has certain limitations derived from the ‘harm principle’ proposed by John Stuart Mill in his book, *On Liberty*. Article 19 (Amended) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) recognized the limitations to freedom of expression by stating that the exercise of these rights carries “special duties and responsibilities” and may “therefore be subject to certain restrictions when necessary”.

Press freedom in Nigeria, as part of freedom of expression, is protected by Section 39 (1) and (2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (Amended). Subsection (1) provides that “every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference”. Subsection (2) provides that “without prejudice to the generality of subsection (1) of this section, every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinion”. Subsection (2) however provides that private ownership of television or wireless broadcast station for any purpose whatsoever must be authorized by the President. Unfortunately, Nigeria has a history of repressing the fundamental rights of her citizens, including freedom of expression, due to her long experience with military rule. Thus, violation of this right was rampant under military rule.

Press freedom in Nigeria, like in all known modern democracies, is not absolute. Section 45 of the 1999 constitution of the FRN (Amended) places limits to the freedom of the press provided in section 39. Section 45 legalizes any law that censors press freedom if such law(s) is/are justified to be in the interest of national security and protecting the rights and freedom of other persons. The restriction of press freedom on this ground is applicable to print, electronic and online press. The existing legislations in Nigeria which regulates press freedom for the reasons spelt out in section 45 of the constitution are the criminal code and the Cybercrimes Act. While the Criminal Code places limits on traditional press (print and electronic) freedom, the Cybercrime Act was introduced in 2015 as a result of the difficulties associated with the prosecution of cyber-related offences such as cyber-stalking. These difficulties were as a result of the internet revolution in Nigeria that increased citizens’ access to the internet for various usages, notably, online journalism.

The popularity of online journalism in Nigeria can be attributed to the rise in internet access. Since the deregulation of the telecommunication section in 2001, internet access in Nigeria has grown exponentially. In 2005, internet penetration stood at 45.1% and data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), World Bank and United Nations Population Division show that there were over 148 million subscribers with 106% teledensity in Nigeria by the end of March 2016 (Okunoye and Ilori 2017). Also, mobile internet subscription in Nigeria according to the Nigerian telecommunications Commission (NCC) was over 95 million in January 2016, representing a penetration rate of 51%. Traditional Journalism in Nigeria has been greatly influenced by the internet revolution that almost all nation-wide newspapers have an online alternative targeting online readers. Despite this positive development, such access came with a

new challenge of dealing with ‘untrained journalists’ who lack journalistic trainings but due to their access to internet, post untrue and sometimes misleading stories.

The Cybercrime Act 2015 is the first legislation in Nigeria that deals specifically with cyber security. It was signed into law by former President Jonathan on May 15, 2015. The Act provides an effective, unified and comprehensive legal, regulatory and institutional framework for the prohibition, prevention, detection, prosecution and punishment of cybercrimes in Nigeria (Cybercrime [Prohibition, Prevention, etc] Act 2015). Cybercrime are crimes in which a computer is the object of the crime or is used as a tool to commit an offense. Offenders may use computer technology to access personal or commercial information, or use the internet for exploitative or malicious purposes (Okoh and Chukwueke 2015). In essence, this Act is aimed at regulating or checkmating abuses by users of internet in Nigeria.

Unfortunately, since it came into effect, there seem to be a systematic pattern of censoring information on online platforms by the Nigerian government through direct and indirect intimidation of users who disseminate information considered ‘anti-government’. The Act has been ambiguously interpreted and used to ‘silence’ journalists and media outlets from carrying out their duties. Presently, there is lack of clarity on the application of the Act in prosecution of cyber-related crimes as government have practically intimidated, threatened or arrest online journalists, as well as arbitrarily closed down online media outlets anytime stories that are critical of their actions are reported online. In fact, according to a Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) report in 2018, press freedom has worsened in Nigeria since the introduction of the Act. The report noted that Nigeria has consistently made the list of the worst nations in the world for deadly, unpunished violence against the press in its Impunity Index ranking.

CSOs have made considerable efforts to promote press freedom and defend rights of journalists across the world including Nigeria. As noted earlier, Nigeria has a history of press repression partly due to its experience of being under military dictatorship for almost three decades since her independence, and partly due to the authoritarian character of political leadership ‘inherited’ from the colonial government and has continued to be an intrinsic feature of all the civilian administrations that have been in power since independence. Thus, CSOs face an enormous task of helping to protect journalists in Nigeria and advance online press freedom. The central focus of this study was an assessment of the role of CSOs in the protection of online press freedom in Nigeria.

Conceptual Framework of Analysis: Understanding the Link between Illiberal Democracy and Restriction of Press Freedom in Nigeria

This study is anchored on the conceptual framework of illiberal democracy as articulated by Fareed Zakaria. An illiberal democracy is also called a ‘partial democracy’, ‘low intensity democracy’, ‘empty democracy’, or ‘hybrid regime’. It is a governing system in which although elections take place, citizens are cut off from knowledge about the activities of those who exercise real power because of the lack of civil liberties. In other words, it is not an “open society”. There are many countries that are categorized as neither ‘free’ nor ‘not free’, but as ‘probably free’, falling somewhere between democratic and nondemocratic regimes (Odeh 2019). This according to Odeh (2019) may be because a constitution limiting government powers exist, but its liberties are ignored, or because an adequate legal constitutional framework of liberties does not exist.

In political theory, an illiberal democracy is defined as one that only pays attention to elections while it violates, in the years between elections, some core democratic principles, especially

freedom of expression. According to Zakaria as quoted by Odeh (2019, p.22), “illiberal democracies are increasing around the world and are increasingly limiting the freedoms of the people they represent”. Zakaria went further to point out that in the West, electoral democracy and civil liberties (of speech, religion, and so on) go hand in hand while in most other parts of the world, the two concepts are coming apart. Odeh (2019) argues that democracy without constitutional liberalism has produced centralized regimes in Africa and it has led to the erosion of liberty, ethnic competition, conflict, and war in the continent.

The end of the Cold War ushered in a period of massive and profound optimism concerning the prospect for democracy in Africa. Under liberalism, democracy is defined as an institutional arrangement in which individuals at political decision, acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the peoples vote, independent judiciary, bill of fundamental human rights, free market economy, and a two or more multiparty system (Schumpeter 2014). The idea of democracy is presently very strong at the global ideological level and very few authoritarian rulers would actively defend traditional, authoritarian modes of rule (Nadia 2006). However, the liberal perception of democracy according to Ake (1984) is misconstrued by African leaders to mean civilian rule. Liberal democracy in post colonial African states like Nigeria reduces the meaning of democracy to rule of the market based on the forces of demand and supply and reliance on the ballot box (Ake 1992).

While the number of ‘electoral democracies’ has increased steadily in Africa, the number of developed liberal democracies remains almost unchanged with the quality of democracy deteriorating as a result of the authoritarian character of leaders in African states. The implication of this is that democratic transitions in post colonial states are developing into a hybrid form of democratic-authoritarian system in which the tenets of liberal democracy such as a free market economy and periodic election are generally followed, but in response to mounting social unrest, rule is more by decree than consent, media critical of government is bullied and power is maintained through corruption, intimidation and force (Payne 1996).

The level of civil and political liberties is crucial index for determining how democratic or free a state is. These civil and political liberties according to Freedom House include freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations that are sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation. This means that the mere manifestation of civilian rule does not amount to democratic rule.

With regards to Nigeria, the return to civilian rule in 1999 ushered in a renewed hope to improve Nigeria’s human right record that was badly damage by frequent and extensive period of military rule between 1960 and 1998. Sadly, the character of the post colonial state of Nigeria has fundamentally remained the same with successive civilian governments exhibiting the same authoritarian tendencies that characterized the Nigerian state under military rule. Although Nigeria has been active in signing and ratifying international human rights treaties that protect individual and press freedom, tolerance for contrary political views to that of the government at all levels remain low, often leading to unlawful detention of citizens and journalists.

The low level of political tolerance for views critical of government policies and actions under democratic rule in Nigeria means that the press continues to be subject of scare tactics and intimidation. As noted by an African Watch report on press freedom in Nigeria, journalists are sometimes arbitrarily invited for ‘chats’ by the State Security Service that involves threat and possible imprisonment. Despite the democratic experimentation, political leadership in Nigeria

continues to cut off the citizens from knowledge about the activities of those who exercise real power because of the lack of civil liberties. The authoritarian character of the government is one that foster illiberal democracy in Nigeria, that is, a liberal society with poor accountability record of the government to the people. The authoritarian government in a liberal society is unwilling to carry out any substantive reform that promotes freedom of information as was the case of the Nigerian state that took over a decade after return to civilian rule to pass the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill into law despite high domestic and international pressures. Also, laws aimed at protecting and promoting individual and press freedom in authoritarian liberal states like Nigeria are often ambiguously stated, resulting in frequent and arbitrary interpretation by the state to suit its authoritarian character. It is in this light that this paper explains the connection illiberal nature of democratic governance in Nigeria and repression of press freedom in Nigeria.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed method of data collection that involved the documentary method of gathering data from secondary sources and the interview method used to gather data from primary sources. Due to the absence of a registered association of online journalists/media outlets in Nigeria as a result of the freelance nature of online journalism, defining the population of the study was difficult. Also, due to time and distance constraints, as well as difficulty in arranging face to face interviews with officials of CSOs in Nigeria involved in the online freedom campaign, we relied on published reports of the activities of the CSOs in Nigeria. Other documentary evidence used includes media reports, published academic and other research works on the subject matter. We however used the non-probability sampling technique (purposive) to identify 20 known online journalists in Nigeria who were willing to participate in the interview. The interview schedule was sent to them via emails to gather their responses. Out of the 20 selected respondents, 10 were freelance journalists and the other 10 worked for known online media outlets. Also, while two out of the 10 freelance online journalists are women, five out of the 10 working for known media outlets are women.

Table 1: Summary/Classification of Interview Respondents

Total number of respondents purposively selected	20
Total number of respondents working for known online media organizations	10
Total number of respondents who are freelance online journalists	10
Total number of women respondents	7
Total number of women respondents who are freelancers	2
Total number of women respondents working for known online media organizations	5

Source: Authors' representation

CSOs and the Advocacy to Review/Reform the Cybercrime Act of 2015 in Nigeria

The Cybercrime Act prohibits cyber stalking in order to effectively regulate the spread of false stories and sometimes also indecent or unethical images online. Section 24 (1a) of the act states that any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter by means of a computer system or network that "is grossly offensive, pornographic or of an indecent, obscene or

menacing character or causes any such message or matter to be sent” has committed an offence under the act and shall be eligible for prosecution. Also, Subsection 1b provides that any person who knowingly or intentionally spreads messages or other matter by means of a computer network system that “he knows to be false, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent” faces the same possibility of punishment (Adibe, Ike & Udeogu 2017).

However, there have been wrongful applications of the section by the government to ‘silence’ opposition views in the online media. First, some stories published online have been deemed offensive, obstructive, insulting or annoying with actionable consequences under section 24 of the Cybercrime Act even when the stories are factual. Secondly, some stories published through traditional media outlets (print and electronic) that were never sanctioned by the government have been attacked by the same government when they are re-broadcasted through online platform. Government considers such online publications ‘offensive’ and libelous because of the rising influence of online platform in Nigeria as major source of information dissemination. The implication of this is that authorities in Nigeria have used the accusation of cyber-stalking to harass and press charges against online journalists for expressing views that are considered unfavourable to the government.

CSOs have been in the forefront of the reform movement of the Cybercrime Act. They identified the flaws in the Act in the early years of its operation and it has in collaboration with some democratic groups, push for its reform. One of the flaws in the Act identified is the fact that it gives security forces power to access citizens’ private data without corresponding liability. This deliberately undermines the effectiveness of investigative journalism because investigative journalists often correspond secretly via private phones and emails with informants who give anonymous tips about corrupt practices within government circle. Another flaw is the failure of the Act to specify in clear terms, the security agency or agencies in charge of prosecuting violators. There have been arrests on grounds of violations of the Act by different security forces including the Nigerian army, giving the appearance of arbitrariness or high-handedness in its application.

Table 2: Advocacy Strategies of CSOs to Push for Reform of Nigeria’s Cybercrime Act of 2015

S/N	ACTIONS TAKEN
1	CSOs like Paradigm Initiative Nigeria, Enough is Enough Nigeria and Media Rights Agenda challenged the constitutionality of sections of the cybercrime law in a lawsuit, saying it threatens human rights online
2	CSOs mentioned above have also sent a draft Digital Rights and Freedom Bill to parliament with an urgent call for a review of the law
3	CSOs have also adopted the strategy of externalizing their struggle in Nigeria. It has repeatedly call for international pressure on Nigerian government to review the Act and continues to publicize Nigeria’s poor ranking in its Impunity Index ranking
4	CSOs have held and collaborated with a lot of democratic organizations to organize

	symposiums/workshops/awareness campaigns aimed at enlightening the public and increasing public consciousness on the fundamentals flaws of the Act and how such flaws are exploited by the government to suppress online press freedom
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Source: Authors’ Compilation from Media Reports and Paradigm Initiative Nigeria’s report Our respondents’ reply to questions on their knowledge of CSOs’ advocacy efforts to push for reform of the Cybercrime Act as summarized in table 3 below further shows a high awareness level among online journalists on the efforts of CSOs to push for review of the Act that increases government censorship on their activities.

Table 3: Respondents Knowledge of CSOs’ Advocacy Efforts

RESPONDENTS KNOWLEDGEABILITY ON CSOs ADVOCACY EFFORTS TO REFORM THE CYBERCRIME ACT IN NIGERIA	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS AWARE	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
Respondents familiar with CPJ collaboration with other CSOs to challenge the constitutionality of the Cybercrime Act	14	70
Respondents familiar with the draft Digital Rights and Freedom Bill collaboratively sent by CSOs to parliament	12	60
Respondents familiar with CSOs’ tactics of externalizing their struggle to gain international attention	19	95
Respondents familiar with CSOs’ public awareness campaign strategies like symposium/workshop/awareness organizations	18	90

Source: Authors’ compilation from interview schedule

The Role of the CSOs in the Protection of Nigerian Online Journalists from Government Suppression

Internet freedom in Nigeria declined due to an unprecedented pattern of arrests and prosecutions against online journalists after the passage of the Cybercrime Act in 2015. Most of these arrests never led to criminal charges in court and the few prosecuted were dropped by the government due to the weaknesses of their claims. While cyber-stalking is aimed at controlling false news online, the Act is been used to prosecute online reporters and media outlets even when their stories are factual. Despite the reluctant passage of the 2011 Freedom of Information (FOI) Act which guarantees the right to access public records, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have criticized government agencies for routinely refusing to release information sought through the law (Freedom House 2016). Online reporters who use the internet platform to report about government activities, or try to cover sensitive stories like official corruption are regularly subjected to criminal prosecution.

CSOs have helped in catering for detained journalists in Nigeria, as well as secure the release of journalists who were arbitrarily arrested by the Nigerian government for doing their jobs. Below

is a table showing some selected cases of arbitrary arrest of online journalists and attacks on media outlets by Nigerian security forces. These online journalists were released as a result of tireless efforts of CSOs that used its strategy of bringing such incident to public domain and externalizing it to pressure the Nigerian government into releasing the detained journalists.

Table 4: Some Cases of Arbitrary Arrests/Detention of Online Journalists and Attacks on Media Outlets Challenged by CSOs

Dates	Incidents
May 18, 2016	A Nigerian journalist and a camera man working for an independent media outlet were detained by police for filming some government officials working with water board while stealing water from broken pipes to sell illegally
September 6, 2016	Nigerian secret police arrest online journalist on suspicion of libeling the governor of a state in southeast, Nigeria
January 19, 2017	Nigerian police raided and arrested two online journalists after their online news agency published an article critical of the Nigerian Army Chief
May 23, 2017	Nigerian authorities demolished a radio station, Breeze 99.9 FM, in what was believed to be a retaliation for the radio’s broadcast
June 12, 2017	Nigerian police raid the office of the daily newspaper, The Daily Sun, after the newspaper outlet published an editorial criticizing the leader of Nigeria’s anti-graft agency, EFCC
August 16, 2018	A Nigerian journalist, Samuel Ogundipe, was jailed for refusing to reveal his source

Source: Authors’ compilation from independent media reports

Table 5: Respondents Knowledge of CSOs’ Efforts to Protect Online Journalists in Nigeria

Summary of Responses	Number	Percentage of Respondents
Number of respondents who think CSOs’ works in Nigeria have helped increased the boldness level on online journalists	18	90
Number of respondents who think CSOs’ involvement contributed to the dropping of charges against online journalists arbitrarily arrested	18	90
Number of respondents who think there has been a significant reduction in state sponsored attacks targeting journalists	4	20
Number of respondents who think a lot still has to be done to promote online press freedom in Nigeria	20	100

Source: Authors’ compilation from interview schedule

Table 4 shows some cases of CSOs' intervention in arbitrary arrest of online journalists and deliberate attacks on media outlets for doing their job. However, table 5 shows that while there is a positive perception that CSOs' work in Nigeria has helped increase the boldness level of journalists and they have been successful in preventing dubious criminal prosecution of online journalists for doing their jobs, there is an overwhelming agreement that a lot still has to be done to promote online press freedom in Nigeria. Eighty (80) percent of our respondents believe that there has been no significant reduction in attacks or repressive moves targeting journalists or aimed at further censoring press freedom. Also, all our respondents agree that a lot still needs to be done to promote online press freedom in Nigeria. The perception of our respondents is valid when we look at Nigeria's press and internet freedom score in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

Table 6: Nigeria's Press Freedom Score: 2017 Index (0=perfect score and 100=worst score) (Status= Partly Free)

Issues	Maximum Score on issues	Nigeria's Score
Legal Environment	30	14/30
Political Environment	40	22/40
Economic Environment	30	15/30
Overall Score	100	51/100

Source: Freedom House (2018) "Internet Freedom Scores: Nigeria" Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/nigeria>

Table 7: Nigeria's Internet Freedom Score: 2018 Index (0=perfect score and 100=worst score) (Status= Partly Free)

Issues	Maximum Score on issues	Nigeria's Score
Obstacle to Access	25	9/25
Limits on Contents	35	10/35
Violations on Users right	40	18/40
Overall Score	100	37/100

Source: Freedom House (2018) "Internet Freedom Scores: Nigeria" Available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/nigeria>

3. CONCLUSION

This study assessed the role CSOs in the protection of online press freedom in Nigeria. The study

acknowledged that the authoritarian origin of political leadership in Nigeria is one that favours repression of the press by the government and the Cybercrime Act of Nigeria is bedeviled with a lot of fundamental flaws in its wordings that makes arbitrary interpretation in a manner that suits the illiberal government common place. Specifically, the study investigated the efforts of CSOs in advocating for reform of the Act and other efforts that aim to advance press freedom in Nigeria. The study found that while public consciousness has increased on the importance of a free media in Nigeria as a result of the efforts of CSOs, a lot still needs to be done to improve Nigeria's ranking and status as a partly free nation when it comes to press and internet freedom. The study also found that while the CSOs have successfully secured the release of many online journalists arbitrarily detained by the Nigerian government through its strategy of externalizing such incidents, increasing attempts are being made by the government of Nigeria to further repress organized media outlets in carrying out their function of news reporting. As noted earlier, authoritarian character of political leadership in Nigeria is one that favours state excessive restriction of online press freedom because of the potency of the internet as a platform for galvanizing political support and its role as an easily accessible source of information about day to day activities of the government. This restriction manifests in the forms of police and army intimidation, harassment and unlawful arrest of online journalist.

In light of these findings, the study recommends that there is need for CSOs to increase collaboration with democratic groups advocate for the promotion of a democratic project in Nigeria that prioritizes economic prosperity of the citizens and sees it as inextricably linked to political freedom. Since several studies have shown a strong link between economic stagnation or underdevelopment and political repression in post colonial states, the importance of promoting liberal democratic tenets in post colonial authoritarian and illiberal states like Nigeria becomes imperative for ensuring online press freedom.

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