

## Public Perception of Media Censorship and Press Freedom During the Coverage of EndSars Protest in Nigeria

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#### Abstract

**Problem:** Several scholars have written that mass media is essential for any society to exist as it is a major means of information dissemination. It is, however, noted that the media in various countries including Nigeria do not function as it ought to because of media censorship. Media censorship, makes the media lose its authority and independence, subsequently becoming the ruling government's 'puppet'. **Approach:** The study was conducted using a survey. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to 238 respondents in Osun State, Nigeria. **Findings:** Findings revealed that the Nigerian media were censored during the 2020 ENDSARS protest. The study also revealed that media censorship affects the objectivity and accuracy of news reports which showed that media censorship made the press operate in an environment of fear. **Conclusion:** The study suggested that Nigerian journalists should be aware of their responsibilities to citizens of their country. It was recommended that the Nigerian government refrain from interfering with the editorial decisions of media organisations and create a conducive environment for journalists to report happenings within the country.

**Keywords:** Coverage, ENDEARS protest, media censorship, press freedom, public perception

#### Introduction

On October 20, 2020, the National Broadcasting Commission, NBC instructed media organisations not to disseminate any information concerning the massacre at Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos State, during the ENDSARS protest in Nigeria because, according to the commission, such information would bring the nation to bad light and cause panic among citizens of the country. Traditional media were restricted from reporting stories about the protest, and any media house that reported anything related to it was sanctioned. Among media houses sanctioned by NBC were AIT, Channels, and Arise TV. The three media houses were later fined a sum of 3 million naira each (Ani, 2020). In the report of *Premium Times* (2019), the Coalition for Whistleblowers Protection and Press Freedom (CWPPF) condemned media censorship by state authorities in Nigeria. According to them, public officers were intolerant of

the fair reporting by journalists and because of that, resolved to use the criminal justice system to suppress free press (Premium Times, 2019).

According to Apuke (2016), ownership is an essential factor in the censorship of mass media. The owner's interest plays a key role in determining the conduct of the press, whether the ownership is private or public. The type of ownership a media organisation has determines the level of freedom the media organisation will have (Apuke, 2016) Sobowale as cited in Apuke (2016), explains that when the ownership of a country's media is in the hands of the government, the media are just voices for those in power and so, instead of performing their surveillance and watchdog functions, they air the opinions of the people in control.

Media censorship poses a threat to press freedom. The uniqueness of any democratic state is seen in a free and fair press. The press of any constitutionally democratic state is meant to be given the privilege to air her views without fear of punishment or prior constraint. When undergoing news gathering procedures and publishing news articles, the press is supposed to enjoy the right to public access and the right to express her mind freely, not according to the ruling party's dictates. Freedom of expression is one of the most essential human rights because it is the sole reason for life to express one's mind and opinion. It is both an individual right and a collective right for journalists and everyone, hence, press freedom. Man as a social being cannot exist without communicating; either with himself or with people around.

Press freedom does not only cover the right of media houses to disseminate information to the people; it also depicts the freedom of individuals to express their opinions within the law. Individuals ought to be free to express themselves providing that whatever they say is not defamatory or libellous. Refusal to grant individuals the right to enjoy this privilege can be seen as a violation/infringement of the fundamental human right enshrined in the Constitution. Media censorship hinders people from airing their views, which creates an underlying threat to press freedom in the country.

The strength of any democracy lies within an independent, professional and responsible press, and its duty is to inform and educate the citizens on happenings within and outside the country (Millet, 2012). However, with media censorship, the press will not be able to perform its duties adequately. Freedom of expression is one of the most essential human rights to people as the virtue of being human beings (Udofa, 2011). Without freedom of expression, it will be impossible for human beings to air their views, and they could eventually die in silence.

There are many instances in which the governing bodies prevented the media from performing its duties, one of which is the 2020 ENDSARS campaign. Traditional media, most especially broadcast media, were instructed to shun reporting stories concerning the protest. NBC instructed that no media house should disseminate news stories relating to the protest, and media houses were penalised once they went contrary to the instruction given (Ani, 2020). Also, activities on online (social) media were interrupted.

The online campaign set up to complement the physical one was stopped by a breach in the data connection of mobile networks. Citizens of Nigeria could not access Twitter, the most popular social medium in Nigeria then, as it did not function properly for an extended time. Mobile networks like Airtel could not be used to surf the internet, and there was constant monitoring of information disbursed on social media; hence, individuals could not disseminate information effectively.

The control of the media restricts freedom of expression and poses a threat to the idea of press freedom in the country. This is why the researchers decided to get the public's perception of media censorship and press freedom during the coverage of 2020 ENDSARS in Nigeria.

The objectives of this study are to find out ways in which mass media are being regulated, find out if media censorship affects the reportage of news items in the country, investigate the causative link between media censorship and limitation to press freedom, find out if there is any evidence of hate speech in the use of the mass media and know the link between controlled mass media and the political system.

### **Literature Review**

The issue of media censorship has been discussed on several platforms and by different scholars; the focus of this study, however, is the impact media censorship had on press freedom during the coverage of the 2020 ENDSARS protest.

Reichman, as cited in Dafiaghor (2011), observes that censorship is “the removal, suppression or restricted circulation of literary, artistic or educational materials on the grounds that they are morally or otherwise objectionable in the light of standards applied by the censor”. He explains that media censorship is the examination of books, plays, films, television, radio programs, news reports, and other forms of communication for the purpose of altering or suppressing ideas found to be objectionable, harmful, or offensive by the censor.

According to Dafiaghor (2011), media censorship can happen before the publication of information, usually by publishers or government agencies or after the information has been published. Governments of countries restrict information on both traditional and social media to protect the state, the family and the church. The Nigerian government has implemented several policies that restrain freedom of the press in Nigeria. To achieve control, media outfits have been deliberately denied advertising revenue by the government and journalists have been illegally harassed and maltreated by ruling governments (Okwuchukwu, 2014).

Omu, as cited in Okwuchukwu (2014), explains that government control could take several forms, such as denying journalists access to places and people for information, refusing to give government advertisements and improper labelling of documents containing valuable information.

The owner’s interest plays a crucial role in determining the conduct of the press, whether the ownership is private or public.

### ***ENDSARS Protest***

In 1992, the Nigerian government formed SARS, Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a special police task force to curb the rate of robbery within the country. The unit was given a special uniform that was not associated with any government agency to differentiate them from others.

In 2017, #ENDSARS began to trend with people sharing their stories of how they had been harassed and tortured severely by the task force. The Inspector-General of Police announced his intention to reorganise the task force, prosecute cases of human rights abuses and organise a better training programme for recruits. But, the attempt was futile because, between January 2017 and May 2020, there were at least 82 cases of torture and ill-treatment by SARS officers as documented by Amnesty International (Chow, 2020).

The immediate trigger of the ENDSARS protest was a video that showed a SARS officer shooting a young motorist in Ughelli, in Delta State, pushing his body out of the car and driving off with the dead man’s Lexus SUV. Within days, crowds of young people gathered in Nigerian cities to demand the abolition of SARS (George, 2020).

The Nigerian youths organised protests in various states and set up an online protest to complement the physical one. The protesters carried placards and banners containing names of people who had been illegally maltreated and killed by this task force. On October 20, 2020, there was an attempt to end the protest, which led to the Lekki Massacre in Lagos State. Accordingly, police and army officers shot at young people who came to protest against SARS and killed 48 of them at the Lagos Lekki Toll Gate (George, 2020).

### ***PRESS FREEDOM***

“The fundamental right to seek and disseminate information through an independent press (press freedom) is under attack” (Repucci, 2019). Elected representatives in democracies who should advocate for press freedom have made attempts to silence the voices of the people in various countries and strengthen media outlets that would disseminate favourable content. The threats to press freedom in countries could be seen as contributors to the breakdown of democracy.

Konvitz (as cited by Abassi and Al-Sharqi, 2015, p.3) explains that freedom of the press is vital to a “free government and to a society that values differences of points of view, intellectual and artistic ferment, originality, the cultivation of a critical faculty, and an open mind on the part of its citizens”

According to Layefa& Johnson (2016), press freedom is every individual's right to air his or her views through the instrumentality of the mass media without prior restraint or undue punishment for what is published. Every human being must be free to air his or her thoughts and convictions, no matter what they are. For the development of every society, all ideas, views, opinions and initiatives must be accepted regardless of the source of such opinions or views.

Nwanne (2014) observes that press freedom is the right of the press to publish any information that is not clearly forbidden by the law. He believes that the mass media institution must be entrusted with the responsibility of surveillance of the environment by presenting the happenings in society. In his words, media without government is better than government without media, but both parties are meant to work interdependently.

There is a link between democracy and the extent of press freedom in any given society. Nigeria, which had been under military regimes for a very long period of time, did not have any evidence of press freedom during those regimes as most journalists were brutally penalised and killed for publishing news stories that threatened the government in power. It was not until 1999 that the Nigerian press reflected some characteristics of the free press (Nwanne, 2014).

Many scholars and professionals have covered issues on media regulation and how it affects the press as it carries out its functions. The system of government in a given country determines whether and to what extent the media carries out its duty in the given country.

Abassi and Al-Sharqi (2015), in *Media Censorship: Freedom Versus Responsibility*, find out that information on the Internet is regulated either visibly or stealthily. They explain that the government adopt stealth regulation by outsourcing and acquiring media and also monitoring the use of online media. In the cause of their study, Abassi and Al-Sharqi discovered that the migration of journalism to the online scene also brought about digital regulation with tools like filtering, blocking, hacking and redirecting. They submit that governments use advanced technologies to monitor online content and redirect the flow of information.

Power (2016) in his study, *Social Media Censorship and the Public Sphere* uses the interview method and secondary data collection method to carry out research on the censorship of social media in China. In carrying out the study, Power employed the Habermas public sphere theory to determine if online censorship of expression in China is in line with popular participation, common concern and disregard for status. It was discovered that foreign social media sites in China are blocked by the Chinese government pointing to an existing social hierarchy and a non-independent social media.

Olaniyani and Akpojivi (2020), in their study, *Transforming Communication, Social Media, counter-hegemony and the Struggle for the Soul of Nigeria*, discover that the migration from traditional media to social media in Nigeria has led the government to regulate the use of social media in the country to limit the usage of private social media accounts and discourage the traditional media from linking their programming to social media. They concluded that social media regulation in Nigeria is an attempt to suppress media freedom and expression and active participation within the media sphere.

Parthasarathi& Agarwal (2020), in *Rein and Laissez Faire: The Dual Personality of Media Regulation in India*, explain that India has a diffused regulatory structure for digital journalism with several forms of state intervention. The most explicit barrier to digital journalism is restraints on bulk SMS. According to them, before the emergence of social media in India, journalists employed bulk SMS to circulate stories published on websites or individual blogs. In 2011, a total of 200 messages a day was imposed on bulk SMS. The restriction prevented independent journalists from bringing wide attention to their reportage. They note that the drastic measure does not only affect the news landscape but also the blogs of individual journalists as host sites are usually blocked.

Furthermore, Almansur (2014) did a study on *Press Freedom: Analysing the portrayal of Nigerian-State on National dailies cover-page headlines*. Almansur states that governments have used license and censorship to control the power of mass media and curtail its contribution and defence of fundamental human rights. He explains that with the repression of journalists and censorship of the media, it is difficult for the press to perform its duties. Almansur's study revealed that the Nigerian press operates within a free environment that suggests embarking on investigative reporting that digs beyond the surface to strengthen existing democratic institutions.

Ani in *Nigeria's #ENDSARS Movement and Media Suppression* (2020) notes that traditional media in Nigeria were restricted from covering the 2020 ENDSARS protest. He explains that the National Broadcasting Commission penalised African Independent Television (AIT), Arise TV and Channels TV for publishing news stories about the protest.

Ani (2020) points out that the Nigerian government suppressed information about the details of the protest as the media was ordered not to publish any information concerning it. Ani's work indicates that Nigerian journalists have gone through torture, violence, silencing and intimidation.

Abubakar and Hassan, in *Regulatory and Political Influence on Mass Media Operation in Nigeria* (2017), explain that punitive laws prevent the media from performing its functions without fear or hindrance. He notes that the various forms of government (colonial, military and democratic) have implemented policies that limit the freedom of the press in the country. Abubakar and Hassan also emphasised that the ruling political system in Nigeria has direct control and influence over what is published in the media. They point out that the political system in Nigeria shapes the operation of the media, its contents, the financial status of the media and what journalists consider as news.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Authoritarian theory of the press and social responsibility theory are the theories upon which this study is anchored. The authoritarian theory was formulated by F.S Siebert, T.B Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in 1956. In this theory, it is believed that truth is centred on power and only those who have power know the truth. According to McQuail, as cited in Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma (2016), the basic assumptions of the theory are that the media should always be subordinate to the government, not publish anything that will undermine established authorities, avoid offences to the majority and unacceptable attacks on authority, deviation from official policy or offences against moral code should be criminal offences.

The weaknesses of this theory are that it hampers press freedom and the free flow of information. It leads to violation of human rights, and it does not give opportunity for competition as most people are reluctant to publish certain news stories because of the fear of punishment. This theory is relevant to this study as it exposes the main theme: limitation to press freedom which this study is centred upon. Media censorship is harmful to every individual citizen of a country as it limits the flow of information within the country.

Social responsibility theory emerged as a result of the misuse of press freedom. The free press provided that there should be a flow of objective news items and other information to facilitate the decision-making of citizens. But the journalists, especially citizen journalists engaged in subjective reporting, defamation of characters, and invasion of privacy that was against the whole idea of libertarianism (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2016).

The theory suggests that the press should be responsible for the presentation and clarification of the goals and values of the society and if it fails to perform these responsibilities, a government agency would be used to ensure such responsibilities are performed. The theory reminds the journalist of his duty to the society and so, he must not use the media to cause confusion in the society. (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2016).

This theory is relevant to this study as it explains that external bodies will be used as checks and balances on the actions of the media and that is what media censorship entails.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study employs the use of a survey research method to carry out a study on 395 journalists and 195 lawyers in Osun State to gather their perceptions on how the media were censored during the 2020 ENDSARS protest. The population of the study comprises 590 journalists and legal practitioners in, Osun State. The journalists and lawyers selected as respondents were based on their level of expertise and years of experience in the field.

To determine the sample size for the questionnaire, Taro Yamane's Sample size formula was adopted viz:

$$n = \frac{N}{[1 + N(e)^{-2}]}$$

Therefore, the sample size is 238

Based on proportional sampling, 67% of the sample was allocated to journalists, while 33% of the sample went to lawyers. Therefore, 159 of the sample size was allocated to journalists, while 79 of the respondents were chosen from lawyers using purposive sampling.

The data instruments that were used to carry out this study were the interview guide and questionnaire. For the interview, the interviewer wrote a list of nine open-ended questions to ask the interviewee to solicit information from the interviewees. The steps involved in the collection of data in the interview include: getting the names of all registered journalists and lawyers from Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Nigerian Barr Association (NBA) respectively, getting the contacts of the concerned journalists and lawyers and sending them text messages to book appointments, calling the journalists and lawyers to conduct the interview face-to-face using an interview guide. For the questionnaire, the researcher made use of close-ended questions to provide uniformity of answers. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to the professional journalists and lawyers in Osun State.

A test re-test was done in order to check the reliability of the study. A test re-test is a method of reliability test in which a sub-sample is taken from the proposed sample for a test and after some time, the same sub-sample is tested again using the same test instrument. The reliability of an instrument is based on the degree of consistency, stability and precision with the appropriate measure. Thirty people from the study’s sample size were selected and used as a pilot study to test the outcome of the study. Data collected were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. For quantitative analysis, the researcher calculated percentages and mean using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to represent data in frequency tables and other graphical representations. SPSS was further used to analyse the descriptive analysis using inferential analysis.

**Results**

A total of 238 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents; only 202 copies of the questionnaire administered were completed and returned and were used for the study. This implies that 85% of the questionnaire administered was completed and returned, while 15% of the questionnaire administered was not returned.

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on occupation**

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Lawyer	71	35.1%
Journalist	131	64.9%
Total	202	100.0%

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Though the respondents are journalists and lawyers who know about censorship and freedom of expression, most of the respondents are senior journalists.

**Table 2: Ways Nigerian mass media are censored:**

Perception of respondents	Mean	Standard Deviation
Nigerian government sanctions media organisations that portray them in bad light	4.27	.839
Nigerian government stops media organisations from reporting stories which portray them in bad light	4.13	1.043
Media organisations are required to pay a fine of 5 million naira on publishing any article that contains hate speech	3.55	1.519
The government limit the number of media houses to cover court proceedings	3.87	1.183
Media houses are shunned from covering stories relating to violence	3.60	1.473
Nigerian Broadcasting Commission stop broadcast houses from using Twitter as a source of news	3.65	1.459
Broadcast stations are prohibited from covering news stories relating to terrorism	3.79	1.445

Source: Field Survey, 2023

**Table 3: Perception of respondents on how Nigerian media were censored during the 2020 ENDSARS protest**

Perception of respondents	Mean	Standard Deviation
Media organisations were allowed to report stories concerning the 2020 ENDSARS protest	3.01	1.362
Media houses were banned from reporting stories concerning the ENDSARS protest	4.01	1.182
Mass media that reported stories concerning the 2020 ENDSARS protest were sanctioned	3.81	1.303

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The mean of the seven items exceeded 3.50, which implies that the Nigerian government sanctions media organisations and portrays them in a bad light (mean =4.27).

**Table 4: Objectivity and accuracy of news items**

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Media censorship affects the objectivity and accuracy of news items	94 (46.5%)	57(28.2%)	22 (10.9%)	16 (7.9%)	13 (6.4%)

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The result on the objectivity and accuracy of news items implies media censorship greatly affects the objectivity and accuracy of news items within the country.

**Table 5: Perception of respondents on the influence of media censorship on reportage of events**

Perception of respondents	Mean	Standard. Deviation
Media censorship affects reportage of events in Nigeria	4.04	1.188
Media censorship makes it difficult for the press to report recent happenings accurately and objectively	4.00	1.216

Source: Field Survey, 2023

This connotes that there was no uniformity in the responses; that is, there were several responses given by the respondents. Responses from the legal practitioners revealed that no country can operate successfully without a press that is free to publish information. They said that if the press of the country is censored, the citizens would not have adequate information to make decisions.

From the responses of the interviewees, media censorship directly limits press freedom- the relationship between them is a cause-and-effectone.

Also, journalists and legal practitioners in Osun State stated that the media disseminates hate speech to the public but the contents of the messages relayed by the station depend on the philosophy of the station. They explained that unverified reports are often deliberately published in the media to ruin the reputations of individuals.

### Discussion

The data analysis outcome reveals that the Nigerian media is regulated as a majority of the respondents agreed that the press is censored by the government's attempts to stop media organisations from reporting news stories sensitive to the image of the country and also sanction media organisations which go ahead to publish such stories. This counters previous findings from Almansur (2014), which suggests that the Nigerian press operates within a free environment devoid of external control. The outcome is in line with the proponents of the authoritarian theory of the



press, which connotes that the media must do the bidding of the ruling government, as the state is more important than constitutional rights.

The analysis also reveals that the Nigerian press was censored during the 2020 ENDSARS protest. From the responses obtained during the field survey, it was evident that media houses were not allowed to cover stories concerning the protest and the ones which published stories concerning the protest were sanctioned. This supports the claim of Ani (2020), which explains that the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) instructed media houses to refrain from disseminating stories concerning the Lekki Toll Gate Massacre during the protest.

The analysis also reveals that there is a relationship between media censorship and the reportage of news items. Analysis shows that 6.4% of the journalists and lawyers strongly disagree that media censorship makes objectivity and accuracy difficult to achieve, while 46.5% of the respondents strongly agree that media censorship makes objectivity and accuracy difficult to achieve. This supports the work of Almansur (2014), which suggests that censorship of the media by the government makes it difficult for the media to exercise its power and perform its duty within the state in which it operates.

Results from the study show that media censorship directly limits press freedom in Nigeria. The study reveals that when the media is censored, it cannot operate in an environment devoid of fear and the press cannot exercise its freedom. The findings are in line with the work of Olaniyan and Akpojivi (2020), which suggests that media regulation is an attempt to suppress media freedom and expression and active participation within the media sphere.

The study shows that there is evidence of hate speech in the use of the media. It reveals that in most cases, hate speech is disseminated in the Nigerian media. The findings indicate that the media, especially social media, is a major tool for perpetrating hurtful information about people within the country. This negates the principles of Social Responsibility theory. The study also shows that the political system operating in Nigeria determines whether and to what extent the media will be controlled. It shows that during the military regime, the press was greatly controlled by dictators and that made journalists ineffective in carrying out their duties. The study also explained that the press is still being controlled by the government in the present political system; a democratic system of government. The Nigerian press still operates in an environment filled with threats and fines imposed by the government. This supports the position of Abubakar and Hassan (2017), who emphasised that the ruling political system in Nigeria directly controls and influences what is published in the media through various policies they implement.

## Conclusion

The study reveals that the Nigerian mass media is regulated internally and externally. The government also sets governing bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), which sets rules and regulations that the press must strictly follow in order to function within the country. The Nigerian mass media was controlled during the 2020 ENDSARS and that limited the power of the press to exercise its freedom. Media houses were banned from reporting stories concerning the ENDSARS protest, and those who reported such stories were sanctioned. The study also revealed that media censorship has a major influence on the reportage of news items. The respondents agreed that censoring the media makes objectivity and accuracy difficult to achieve. Based on all this evidence, the Nigerian press is not fully independent. From the extent of the literature reviewed, it is evident that control of the media within any country is inevitable. The media, if not controlled will misuse its freedom, and that could affect individuals within the country. It is noted, however, that media censorship could hamper press freedom in cases where the ruling government do not allow the press to publish stories that are not in their favour.

Arising from the results of this study, it can be concluded that the Nigerian mass media is controlled by laws, rules and regulations laid down by the government and that subsequently affected the way the mass media operated during the 2020 ENDSARS protest as it did not provide adequate information on the protest. There is evidence from the responses of the respondents that media houses were banned from reporting stories concerning the protest and the Nigerian government took steps to sanction organisations that reported stories concerning it.

The following recommendations are made based on the results of this study. The Nigerian government should enable a conducive environment for journalists to report recent happenings without fear of being sanctioned. The government should also refrain from interfering with the editorial decisions of media organisations within the

country. There is an urgent need for Nigerian journalists to be properly aware of their responsibilities to the citizens of the country. Nigerian journalists should be deliberate in their news-gathering process and presentation of news stories. Journalists should refrain from publishing unverified information and defamatory statements against individuals while the Nigerian press should be allowed to operate without external interference. However, it should be noted that the study was only conducted in a state. Using more states for similar studies may generate a more valid outcome. Therefore, studies should be conducted using all the states of regions and audiences of various disciplines to get more public perception on press censorship in Nigeria.

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