

Problems and Prospects of Investigative Journalism in Rivers State, Nigeria: A Study of *the Tide* and *Hard Truth* Newspapers.

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Abstract

The practice of investigative journalism in Nigerian is facing several challenges which pose great threat to the benefits that accrue from this vital aspect of the journalism profession. Hence, this paper examines the problems and prospects of investigative journalism in Rivers State, Nigeria using the survey research method. A total of 56 Journalists (43 from *The Tide* and 13 from *The Hard Truth* newspapers) were sampled. The findings indicated that investigative journalism is practised in Nigeria but its level of practice is abysmally low due to myriads of problems bedevilling the practice. However, there are greater prospects of its practice with the signing of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill into law in 2011. Hence, the paper recommends a proactive approach to investigative journalism while harnessing the opportunities as envisaged in the FOI Act.

Key words: Investigative Journalism, Newspaper, Social Responsibility, Public Interest.

1.1 Background to the Study

The media are the bridge between the government and the governed as well as the mouthpiece of the society. A basic duty of the media professionals in every society is to be a civic watchdog whose mission is to uncover secrets / issues and keep the government accountable to society. As observed by Itule & Anderson (2007:397), to achieve this often demands investigation and in-depth work which requires researching, digging deeply, interviewing and writing.

Investigative Journalism (IJ) also called watchdog journalism means exposing how laws and regulations are violated; it is holding the powerful accountable. Succinctly put, investigative journalism is the finding, reporting and presentation of news which other people try to hide (www.journalism.eu). Relatively new as the term is, investigative journalism has through the decade metamorphosed into a formidable tool for critically and thoroughly exposing facts and secrets which governments, institutions, organisations or individuals would naturally try to obscure from the public. It must be noted that fact-finding and fact-giving are some of the basic goals of journalism. Hence, it is necessary to determine any doubtful issue and that must be made public too. However, Ugwu, (2010) observes that investigative journalism in a developing nation like Nigeria is threatened with numerous challenges which are almost crippling its proper practice, its prospects notwithstanding.

1.2 Statement of Problem

There are claims that investigative journalism has been in the decline since its haydays in the 1970s, and many investigations are now more concerned with entertainment than information (Harcup, 2009:110). However, investigative journalism as practised in Nigeria is ineffective as it is constrained by several problems despite its bright prospects. More often than not, journalists publish half truth, distorted stories and outright falsehood without in-depth investigation, thereby making rumours, unsubstantiated claims and emotions the bedrock of information gathering. This provoked this study of investigative journalism in Rivers State of Nigeria.

The study sought to: determine whether investigative journalism is practised in Rivers State of Nigeria; ascertain the level of investigative journalism practised in Rivers State; determine the challenges facing investigative journalism in Rivers State and determine the prospects of investigative journalism in Rivers State, Nigeria.

This study was guided by the following research questions: Is investigative journalism practised in Rivers State of Nigeria?, At what level is investigative journalism practised in Rivers State, Nigeria?, What are the challenges facing the practice of investigative journalism in the State?, What are the prospects of investigative journalism in Rivers State, Nigeria? The findings of this research would enable journalists to appreciate their collective challenges in the field of investigative journalism. The study would serve as a platform for further empirical study on the topic under investigation.

2.1 Literature Review

Chambers (2000:89) posits that investigative journalism in the United Kingdom had flourished in the last three decades of the 20th century. However, Dorril (2000) contended that investigative journalism enjoyed “a brief bloom in the seventies, flowered for a short period in the seventies, badly wilted in the eighties and is now effectively dead.” On the contrary, Hanna (2000:2) argues that investigative journalism was not dead but in decline. Variables responsible for the decline, according to him are structured changes within the media since

1970s and relentless cost-cutting .

The Nigerian press has over the years played an active role in the struggle for the country's independence and influenced the thinking and actions of stakeholders as well as government policies. Today, scholars hold that the Nigerian press has become lazy and does less in-depth reporting. Abide (2010) noted that "sensational news, congratulatory messages and coronation news have become the major contents of national newspapers" (www.naij.nig.org). Many vital issues and events of social significance seem to have been left out of the daily reportage in the newspapers.

Media Right Agenda (MRA) (2011) in a workshop in Abuja identified the causes of the dearth of investigative journalism to include: threats to life and job, personal / political interests and the policy of secrecy on government at all levels.

Studies have shown that the style of investigative journalism goes beyond the usual coverage of incidence, press conferences and press statements. Scholars agree that investigative journalism seeks to unearth the hidden information of vice, malpractice and misdemeanour that may injure society (Horrie, 2008; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007). Investigative reporting has now begun to change the definition of news value. It is gradually shifting news reporting from the old style of reporting on spectacular single incidents and personal crimes to more original conscious reporting on the systematic operations of societies (Ocholi, 2010). With recourse to the statement above, it is evident that the investigative journalist does not wait for news to happen. He is not given to events and locational beats, but rather he goes beyond the day's news to get the news behind the news. Ufuophu – Biri (2008:127) is of the opinion that "investigative journalism goes beyond mere reporting of plain and visible facts. It involves digging deep to uncover that which has been hitherto hidden." The distinguishing element according to Ohaja (2011) is that:

The report which must be of public importance should stem from the finding of a reporter; not a report of an investigation made by someone else. It must also be an issue which those involved are attempting to hide from the public.

This form of journalism has long standing in the press. It was first identified in the early twentieth century in America (Muckraking era) when magazine journalists took the lead in exposing political corruption, social problems and economic exploration through investigation. According to Assay (2009:8), cited in Ocholi (2010) in a typical Nigeria setting, exposing corrupt practices by government officials can be a very herculean task for the media. Officials use the police, thugs and security operative to harass, intimidate, abuse and even assault journalists. A lot of journalists have lost their lives while investigating very delicate scandalous stories. Ocholi (2010) posits:

A very good example of this is the various arrest, detention and damages of working tools like cameras, midgets of journalists covering scandalous cases. Some even lost their lives in the process. The case of Dele Giwa of the News Watch magazine, and Baguda Kaltho of the News are clear examples. Other examples of harassment and detention are cases like those of Durojaye Rotimi, senior Advocate and correspondent of Daily Independent, and Bayo Arelubu of African independent Television (AIT) who were arrested and charged to court in 2006 for reporting on the presidential jet which was purchased with billions of naira.

The press has been found guilty on several fronts as expressed by Agbese (2000:13) thus: "reports do not correctly mirror the society. They ignore the wider national interest in pursuit of narrow and selfish interests." However, literature have failed to ex-ray the specific problems associated with in-depth journalism in Rivers State of Nigeria. Furthermore, the prospects of investigative reporting which constitute incentive to journalism have not been emphasised. This is the concern of this study.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Social Responsibility theory. The theory argues the press is duty-bound to be responsive and accountable to the society which it serves. As cited in McQuail (2008:171), Hutchin's (1947) report notes that a responsible press should provide a full, truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day's events in a context which gives them meaning. However, in Rivers State of Nigeria, vital issues seem to have been glossed over in newspaper reportage where the press is concerned more with sensational news.

4.1 Research Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. Questionnaire and interviews were used to elicit behavioural responses which reflected feelings, beliefs, attitudes and opinions of respondents on investigative journalism. The population of this study consisted of all the registered journalist working with *The Tide* and *Hard Truth*

newspapers in PortHarcourt, Rivers State of Nigeria. This yielded 50 for *The Tide* and 15 for *The Hard Truth*, totalling 65

Fifty six journalists were selected from the two newspaper organisations based in PortHarcourt namely the *The Tide* and *The Hard Truth* newspapers. For the purpose of this study, *The Tide* with a proportionate sample size of 43 was selected to represent state owned newspapers while the *Hard Truth* with a proportionate sample size of 13 was selected to represent private newspapers. Taro Yamane(1963) sample size formula as stated in Ogbuoshi (2006) was adopted to determine the representation sample size as illustrated below:

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

Where n = sample size; N = population size; e= level of precision; 1= constant unit.

Note: N=65=population of journalists in *The Tide* and *Hard Truth* Newspaper (Authors field work, 2013)

Substituting ∴

$$n = \frac{65}{1 + 65(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{65}{1.1625} = 55.9139 = 56 \text{ (approximately)}$$

The Technique adopted in the sampling is the multi- stage approach whereby varying techniques were involved at different stages. First, purposive method was used to select the two daily newspapers. Next, proportionate sampling method was adapted to select 43 respondents from *The Tide* and 13 respondents from the *Hard Truth* newspapers. The copies of the questionnaire were respectively administered to the journalists(who were also staff of the Tide and Hard Truth newspaper organisations) by the researcher and his two trained assistants. The two newspapers are widely circulated and read not only in Rivers State but also in South-South States of Nigeria. Questionnaire was the major instrument used to collect the principal data for this study. However, references were made to secondary sources such as books, newspapers, journals and internet sources. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the 56 journalists selected for the study. These journalists were given an interval of two days to fill the copies after which the researcher was able to recover 53 copies which indicated 94.64% response rate (*The Tide* = 39 (73.58%), *Hard Truth* = 14 (26.42%).The reliability of the questionnaire was determined through a test-retest procedure whereby office 5 copies of the questionnaire were drawn at *The Tide* general office. After one-week interval, the instrument was again administered to the same sample of journalists at the same point. The correlation coefficient of the two sets of measurements was $r = 0.89$. The data collected for this study were analysed using quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. The former involved analyses, interpretation and presentation of statistics using tables, frequencies and percentages, while the latter analysed the open ended responses. Inputs from interview with two newspaper reporters were used to interpret the findings.

4.2 Data Presentation and Analysis

4.2.1 Research Question 1

The data and analysis in tables 1a and 1b provided answer to research question 1 which says: is investigative journalism practised in Nigeria?

The data in table 1a showed that investigative journalism is practised in Rivers state of Nigeria. The data showed that 30 (56.60 %) respondents agreed that investigative journalism is practised while 23(43.40%) said that it is not practised. However, it is practised more in private newspaper houses than it is observed in government newspapers. This is evident in table 1b below where 12 (85.71%) responded in the affirmative for the *Hard Truth* which represents private newspapers as against 16 (41.03%) responses for *The Tide* which represents government owned newspapers.

4.2.2 Research Question 2

At what level is investigative journalism practised in Rivers State of Nigeria?

The data in table 2 showed that the extent of practice of investigative journalism in Rivers State, Nigeria is low. While only 18 (33.96%) respondents agreed that it was high, 35 (66.04%) affirmed that it was low.

4.2.3 Research Question 3:

What are the challenges facing the practice of investigative journalism in Rivers State?

As shown in table 3(a) above, there were challenges facing the practice of investigative journalism in Rivers State of Nigeria. Fear of death (35.21%), poor remuneration (22.64%) ownership influence (22.64%), corruption(13.21%) constant harassment by government (5.66%) were among the challenges in order of magnitude. The data in table 3(b) showed that the challenges could be overcome as expressed by 51 respondents or (96.23%) who were in the affirmative.

4.2.4 Research Question 4

What are the prospects of investigative journalism in Rivers State, Nigeria?

The data in table 4a showed that the prospects of the practice of investigative journalism in Rivers State of Nigeria appeared challenging with the greatest prospect for more quantitative in-depth stories. This is evident from the high recorded for both newspaper houses with 30 (56.60%) responses, followed by more qualitative news stories with 20 (37.74%) responses. Furthermore, as shown in table 4b, the prospects as indicated in table 4a could be achievable in Rivers State. The overwhelming affirmative response of 94.34% indicated this.

5.1 Discussion of Findings

The data analysed indicate that investigative journalism is practised in Rivers State of Nigeria as 56.60% of the respondents (Journalists) agreed. This finding agreed with that of Ocholi (2010) who concluded that investigative journalism is recognised and practised in most media houses in Nigeria especially the print media. The analysis also revealed that the extent or level of practice of investigative journalism was abysmally low as 66.64% of the respondents affirmed. This finding validates the assertion by Assay (2009) who advanced that the Nigeria mass media still maintained a crawling speed in the field of vibrant investigative reporting unlike their counterpart in developing South Africa and Ghana. This analysis also showed that death threat is the greatest challenge facing the practice of investigative journalism in Nigeria. Citing the case of Dele Giwa, Olaniya (2008) acknowledged that most journalists in Nigeria prefer to gloss over incriminating facts concerning the government, institutions and society for the fear of being murdered.

As a guarantee for the practice of investigative journalism in Nigeria, it is obvious from the responses that access to information will invariably lead to in-depth analysis of stories. This is corroborated by the finding made by Iheakah (2007) in his study where he identified the absence of freedom of information law as a major constraint to the practice of investigative journalism.

6.1 Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were made:

In the first place, even though, investigative journalism is a relatively new field in journalism it is recognised and practised in Nigeria. Also, the extent of practice of investigative journalism is rather low and not encouraging in spite of many media houses in the country. It is surprising to note that even with so much media houses in the country, the extent of practice of investigative journalism is low. On the other hand, there are no provisions for the security and insurance of the journalists who want to go into investigative journalism as death threats has been a major undoing of the practice in Nigeria.

Finally effective practice of investigative journalism in Nigeria holds some alluring prospects for the future of print media in Nigeria particularly with the signing of Freedom of Information Bill (FOB) into law.

7.1 Recommendations

The researcher makes the following recommendations based on the findings of the study:

- Media owners should come to terms with the reality of the primary role of the media in a democratic society which is to tell the truth objectively covering all shades of opinion and facts relevant to the issue in question. This is what investigative journalism can do and the editorial policy should espouse this to the latter.
- Media owners should not sacrifice the truth on the altars of partisanship or profit-making or any other selfish ends.
- Journalists should constantly engage themselves in fora such as symposia, workshops and the likes to evaluate the practice of investigative journalism in the country and chart the way forward.

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Appendix

Table 1(a): Data Showing Journalists' Responses on the Practice of Investigative Journalism in Rivers State.

Nature of Statement	Responses	Frequency(Freq)	Percentage(%)
Do you think that investigative journalism is practised in Rivers State?	YES	30	56.60
	NO	23	43.40
	Total	53	100

Table 1b: Data Showing Journalists Responses on the Practice of investigative Journalism According to Newspapers.

Nature of Statement	Response	The Tide	Hard Truth
Do you think that investigative journalism is practised in Rivers State?	Yes	16 (41.03%)	12 (85.71%)
	No	23 (58.97%)	2 (14.29%)
	Total	39 (100%)	14 (100%)

Table 2: Data Showing the Extent of Investigative Journalism Practice in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Extent of Journalism practice	Responses	Freq	Percentage(%)
High	Yes	18	33.96
Low	No	35	66.04
Total		53	100%

Table 4b: Data Showing that the Prospects for Investigative Journalism are achievable in Rivers State.

Responses option	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	50	94.34
No	3	5.66
Total	53	100%

Table 3(b): Data Showing Whether the Challenges stated in table 3(a) could be overcome.

Responses	Frequency(f)	Percentage (%)
Yes	51	96.23
No	2	3.77
Total	53	100%

Table 4a Data Showing the Prospects of Investigative Journalism in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Responses (prospect)	Freq(f)	%
More qualitative news stories	20	37.74
More quantitative (in-depth) news stories	30	56.60
Increased remuneration	3	5.60
Total	53	100%

Table 3(a): Data Showing the Challenges facing Investigative Journalism in Rivers State.

Challenges facing the practice of Investigative Journalism in Rivers State.	Freq(f)	Percentage(%)
Fear of Death	19	35.21
Constant Harassment by Government	3	5.66
Poor Remuneration	12	22.64
Corruption	7	13.21
Ownership Influence	12	22.64
Total	53	100%