



Freedom of Information Act and Challenges to Journalism Practice in South East Nigeria 2015-2019

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Abstract

The enactment of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act in 2011 was a step towards democratizing access to government-held information in Nigeria. Several years after its enactment, it is pertinent to examine how liberalising the law has been, how Nigerian journalists have utilised the Act in discharging their responsibilities, and the challenges they encounter in the process. To this end, this study examined the extent of knowledge of the FOI Act among Nigerian journalists, the extent of its use by Nigerian journalists, and the challenges of using it in journalism practice. The study relied on the Social Responsibility theory and adopted both survey and in-depth interview methods. Questionnaire and Interview Guide were used as data collection instruments. The findings show a high level of awareness and knowledge of the Act among the journalists, but also reveal low utilisation of the Act among the respondents. Further results indicate denial of access, partial release of information, and lack of feedback as challenges hindering adequate utilisation of the Act. This suggests that the challenges faced by journalists in using the Act are related to accessibility, meaning that although the Act democratizes access to information, its democratizing effects have yet to be fully realised by Nigerian journalists. The study recommends, among other things, that the government should repeal extant laws inhibiting the adequate utilisation of the Act.

Key words: Challenges, FOIA, Journalism practice, Press freedom, South East

Introduction

In 2011, the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act was enacted. The Act provides access to public records and information, which, by extension, has democratized the media space in Nigeria. With the enactment of the FOI Act, the ready availability of social media platforms, and the democratic nature of Nigeria, it follows that the Nigerian media, which are already assumed to be independent,

will now have unrestrained freedom to practise qualitative journalism—an ideal encapsulated in the social responsibility theory of the press and enhanced by the Act. Dunu & Ugbo (2014) argue that the Act has “created high expectations from the public concerning journalism practice” in Nigeria, as well as provided “a broader window of opportunity to practise unfettered journalism.” Similarly, Nnanwuba, Ekwenchi, and Okolie (2019) argue that the perceived benefits of the Act to journalism practice range from legal protection for journalists accessing government-held information to a reduction of the cost and risk involved in accessing sensitive information. They also argue that while there is an encouraging number of individuals and organisations using the Act to demand information, the majority of these individuals and organisations do not belong to the media industry, which implies a reluctance among journalists to utilise the Act.

Within this context, how have the media managed the issue of unlimited access to public records and information in discharging their responsibilities, ensuring they do not infringe on people’s rights? Since media practice is bound by law and ethical principles, how do these factors affect the ethics of journalism in Nigeria with regard to the FOI Act? Although current studies have established the under-utilisation of the Act by journalists in Nigeria (Aliede, 2021; Ridwan, 2015; Dunu & Ugbo, 2014), it appears few of these studies have given thought to the challenges impeding the use of the Act, as more could still be done to strengthen the legislation (Aliede, 2021). Consequently, this study interrogates the challenges of using the Act in the day-to-day activities of journalism practice, as well as Nigerian journalists’ perceptions of its utilisation.

Statement of the Problem

The FOI Act has been described as a powerful investigative tool that empowers the media to hold public officers accountable to the people. However, this is only possible when journalists utilise this investigative tool to uncover facts and fight corruption (Dunu & Ugbo, 2014). Research has, however, revealed that Nigerian journalists are not making adequate use of this powerful instrument (Nnadi & Obot, 2014) in ensuring a more open and transparent society, as well as promoting democracy and responsible government in Nigeria. Since previous studies (e.g., Nnadi & Obot, 2014; Ezinwa, Ngwu & Onah, 2014) have established minimal use of the Act, this study investigates the challenges to its effective use.

Studies have also shown that even with the euphoria that greeted the enactment of the FOI Act in Nigeria, journalists still perceive the Act as incapable of advancing journalism practice in terms of fair, balanced, and objective reporting, as well as strengthening investigative journalism (Oberiri, 2016; Aliede, 2014; Ezinwa, Ngwu & Onah, 2014). Although the Act has been in existence since 2011, its implementation appears to be below expectations. This study examines journalists’ perceptions some years after previous studies were conducted. Are there bottlenecks impeding its utilisation? Additionally, with the high level of awareness and knowledge established by existing studies on the FOI Act and journalism practice in Nigeria (Oberiri, 2016), this study investigates whether, with the passage of time, there has been any change for the better or otherwise in journalists’ awareness and knowledge of the Act. In the light of the foregoing, several questions become pertinent: What is the extent of knowledge of the FOI Act among Nigerian journalists? What are the challenges that impede the utilisation of the FOI Act by Nigerian journalists? What is the perception of Nigerian journalists regarding the utilisation of the Act?

Research Questions

- i. What is the knowledge level of the FOI Act among Nigerian journalists?
- ii. To what extent do Nigerian journalists utilise the FOI Act?
- iii. What is the perception of Nigerian journalists regarding the utilisation of the FOI Act?
- iv. What are the challenges of using the Act in journalism practice?
- v. What are the implications of the FOI Act for journalism practice?

Scope of the Study

This study focused on the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, with particular emphasis on its perceived challenges and implications for journalism practice among practising journalists in South Eastern Nigeria. The research was limited to members of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), South East Chapter, representing Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states. This study covered the period between 2015 and 2019 to explore the extent of knowledge, the extent of use, and the challenges impeding the utilisation of the FOI Act in the second four years of its existence, among other factors.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it aims to expose the challenges of utilising the Freedom of Information Act in the daily activities of journalism practice in Nigeria, and the implications of these challenges for the practice of journalism. Furthermore, as it appears that most previous studies on the FOI Act in Nigeria have not adequately addressed this area, this study makes a substantial empirical contribution to the body of knowledge on the FOI Act and journalism. Additionally, the study provides an empirical foundation for replicative studies in other regions of Nigeria, in order to determine whether variations exist in those areas.

Review of Empirical Studies

In 2010, Worthy conducted a study entitled "More Open but Not More Trusted? The Effect of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on the United Kingdom Central Government". The study examined the impact of Britain's Freedom of Information Act 2000 on the British Central Government. Worthy investigated the extent to which the Act had met the six objectives identified in the study, in comparison with similar legislations in Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. Using a combination of methods, including interviews, online surveys, and analysis of official documents and media articles on FOI, Worthy concluded that the Act had met its two primary objectives of increasing transparency and openness, and increasing accountability. However, it had yet to meet the four secondary objectives: improved decision-making by government, improved public understanding, increased participation, and trust in government. Although Worthy's study differs from the present study, both are related. In fact, the results of the study suggest that even in the United Kingdom, there are still issues with the implementation of the FOI Act, indicating that this issue may not be unique to Nigeria.

In a study entitled "A Critical Assessment of Nigeria's Freedom of Information Act 2011", Mmadu (2011) raised the issue of whether the enactment of the FOI Act marked a departure from the secrecy typically associated with government information, and specifically, the extent to which the FOI Act could meet the people's desire for access to government-held information. Mmadu conducted a comparative analysis of FOI regimes in Nigeria alongside other jurisdictions, such as Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom (UK), and India, using the following guidelines:

maximum disclosure, obligation to publish, promotion of open government, scope of exemptions, processes to facilitate access, costs, precedence of disclosure, and protection for whistle-blowers. The study concluded that Nigeria's FOI Act lacks adequate provisions, is riddled with inconsistencies, and offers little to satisfy Nigerians' thirst for access to information. While Mmadu's study assessed the provisions of the FOI Act 2011, the present study focuses on the challenges and implications of the Act for the daily practices of journalism.

Equally relevant to this study is Kuunifaa's (2011) "Access-to-Information Legislation as a Means to Achieve Transparency: The Jamaican Experience". This study explored the anticipated implementation challenges of the FOI Act in Jamaica and the lessons Ghana could learn regarding its then-pending FOI Bill. Using case studies, interviews, and document reviews, the study found that in Jamaica, challenges to the implementation of the FOI Act included public interest tests, issues with the scope of follow-through, a complicated procedure for requesting information by telephone, lack of personnel, and the release of records by public authorities. The study also revealed challenges in Ghana, where record-keeping was a major obstacle to the implementation of the Act.

In another study entitled "An Evaluative Study of the Freedom of Information Act and Media Practice in Nigeria", Nsereka and Ammanah (2014) found that the FOI Act could foster effective media practice, but that its effectiveness would require the amendment or removal of anti-press laws from Nigerian legislation. Using a combination of survey and interview methods, the study found that all respondents in Rivers State were aware of the provisions of the Act. The study highlighted the Nigerian Constitution as the biggest barrier to the effective maximisation of the FOI Act, followed by the government, the press, the judiciary, and society. From the findings of this study arises the question: How can the provision of the FOI Act in Section 1(1), which grants the right of access to government-held information regardless of any other law, be reconciled with the provision of the 1999 Constitution, which declares its supremacy in Section 1(1)? This question is important because the Constitution does not provide for a right of access to government-held information, and in Section 1(3), it states that if any law is inconsistent with the Constitution, the Constitution shall prevail, and the other law shall be void to the extent of its inconsistency. The study concluded that the FOI Act is a catalyst for freedom, responsibility, good governance, fairness, accuracy, and objectivity. Nsereka and Ammanah's study is related to the present study because it investigates the level of awareness among Nigerian journalists regarding the FOI Act and the perceived impediments to its effective use, particularly in Rivers State. Similarly, Abone and Kur, in their 2014 study, "Perceptual Influence of Freedom of Information Act on Journalism Practice in Nigeria", found a high level of awareness of the Act among journalists in Anambra State. Their study corroborates the 2016 study by Oberiri in Jalingo. Abone and Kur concluded that the Act has positive implications for journalism practice in Nigeria, but recommended that journalists make maximum use of the Act and that some ambiguous provisions be reviewed.

Moreover, a study entitled "Spitting on a Blood Document: An Analysis of Nigerian Journalists' Perception and Implementation of the Freedom of Information Act", conducted by Ezinwa, Ngwu, and Onah in 2014, found that Nigerian journalists did not have a detailed understanding of the content of the FOI Act. The study revealed that journalists did not see the Act as capable of strengthening investigative journalism or providing them with protection in their daily activities. This study raised the issue of the under-utilisation of the FOI Act, as out of 231 respondents, only

7 (3%) had used the Act to request information from a government institution, while 224 respondents (97%) had not used the Act at all. The present study seeks to determine whether the situation has changed and to either validate or contradict these findings.

Also relevant to this study is Nnadi and Obot's (2014) study, entitled "Akwa Ibom State Journalists' Reaction to the Freedom of Information Act". The study examined the level of awareness of the provisions of the FOI Act among journalists, their impressions of the Act, their experiences since its inception, and their perceptions regarding enforcement and compliance in Akwa Ibom State. The study revealed that the majority of practicing journalists had not read the Act, although most were of the opinion that the provisions of the Act were satisfactory. Nevertheless, the study also found that the majority believed the Act had enhanced transparency and accountability in government. Ironically, however, most journalists had not applied for information from either government or private institutions, and many maintained that the Act had not improved access to information.

Equally relevant to the present study is Dunu and Ugbo's (2014) study, "The Nigerian Journalists' Knowledge, Perception and Use of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Law in Journalism Practices". The study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods to assess Nigerian journalists' knowledge, perception, and use of the FOI Law in their work. Despite the total awareness of the Act by journalists, the study found that a significant majority of respondents had not used the Act. This is particularly concerning given that 78% of respondents fully understood the principles of the Act, and 82% regarded it as an investigative tool in news gathering. The study highlights that awareness and knowledge of the FOI Act do not translate into effective utilisation or enforcement. This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by Nigerian journalists in using the Act and the implications of the Act for journalism practice. This is particularly important considering that 85% of respondents indicated there were challenges to the use of the FOI law, compared to 15% who indicated otherwise.

A study entitled "An Evaluative Study of the Freedom of Information Act on Journalism Practice in Nigeria" conducted by Oberiri (2016) concurs to some extent with Mmadu's study. Oberiri's study found that the FOI Act has not provided access to government-held information for journalists in Taraba State. The study, using a survey design, also found that journalists in Jalingo were fully aware of the Act. This study seeks to determine whether full awareness of the Act exists in South East Nigeria. Gyson, Jamo, and Yakubu's (2017) study, "Utilisation of the 2011 Freedom of Information Act in Selected States of North Central Nigeria", is relevant and related to this study. The study examined the extent to which the Act was utilised five years after its passage, as well as journalists' knowledge of its benefits and challenges. The study found that, despite high awareness of the Act, its utilisation remained low due to factors such as laziness, the existence of restrictive laws, and a culture of secrecy. The study recommended that journalists should rise to their responsibilities and utilise the Act for the benefit of society.

Theoretical framework

Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility theory was propounded by Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm in 1956. This theory originated from the Hutchins Commission's Report of 1947 (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012; McQuail, 2010; Ezinwa, Ngwu & Onah, 2014; Ojobor, 2002;

Bittner, 2005). The findings of the Commission, chaired by Robert Hutchins, then Chancellor of Chicago University (Blanchard, 1977, in McQuail, 2010), “were critical of the press for its frequent failings and for being so limited in the access it gave to voices outside the circle of a privileged and powerful minority” (p. 170). Accordingly, the press was required to provide a full, truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day’s events, serve as a forum for the exchange of comment and criticism, and be a common carrier of public expression. It should also give “a representative picture of constituent groups in society” as well as “present and clarify the goals and values of society” (McQuail, 2010).

According to Bittner (2005), the Social Responsibility theory holds that “a press has the right to criticise government and institutions but also has certain basic responsibilities to maintain the stability of society” (p. 348). The position put forward by the scholar points to the fact that while it is the duty of the press to hold the government accountable to the people, the press should also ensure that it operates within the bounds of the law. If it does not, the government can intervene to ensure the orderliness and stability of society. This is why Ojobor (2002) is correct when he states that the “theory believes that freedom carries concomitant obligation” (p. 11).

Accordingly, Okunna and Omenugha (2012) contended that the theory became necessary due to the negative practices the press was engaged in, which, according to them, “culminated in yellow journalism, characterised by sensationalism, irresponsibility, and character assassination” (p. 204). They argued that Social Responsibility theory allows the press to enjoy the freedom granted by the Libertarian theory but should do so with a sense of responsibility. However, if journalists cannot regulate themselves, then the government can control them. Sandman and his associates (1987) corroborated Okunna and Omenugha when they posited that the essence of the theory is that it is obligatory for the media to behave in certain ways. According to them, “If they meet that obligation voluntarily, fine; otherwise, the government may be forced to make them meet it” (p. 168). It was in an attempt to live up to that responsibility that journalists developed “self-regulatory mechanisms” (Okunna & Omenugha, 2012), giving rise to what is now known as the ethics of journalism, which guides the activities of journalists. McQuail (2010) summarised the main propositions of Social Responsibility theory as follows:

- The media have obligations to society, and media ownership is a public trust.
- News media should be truthful, accurate, fair, objective, and relevant.
- The media should be free, but self-regulated.
- The media should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct.
- Under some circumstances, government may need to intervene to safeguard the public interest.

Baran and Davis (2010) articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the theory. According to them, the strengths of the theory lie in the fact that it values media responsibility, audience responsibility, diversity, pluralism, and limits government intrusion in media operations, while still allowing reasonable government control of the media. They also argue that the theory aids the “powerless”, appeals to the best instincts of media practitioners and audiences, and is consistent with the US legal tradition. However, they maintain that the theory is overly optimistic about the media’s willingness to meet responsibility and overly optimistic about individual responsibility. It also underestimates the power of profit motivation and competition, as well as legitimises the status

quo. Despite these criticisms, when considering the tenets of Social Responsibility Theory, we find that it remains the guiding principle that underpins the ethical aspirations of journalistic practice, which should be enhanced by the FOI Act. This is why this study is anchored on this theory, to examine the extent to which the tenets, which are similar to the ethics of the journalism profession, are causing challenges for practising journalists in Nigeria in the implementation of the Act.

Methodology

This study adopted survey and in-depth interview methods. The survey was considered suitable for this study because, according to Baran (1999 in Nwodu, 2006), surveys allow researchers to measure characteristics, opinions, or behaviours of a population by studying a small sample and making generalisations about the population. Similarly, Wimmer and Dominick (2005) argued that through the survey method, a large amount of data can be collected with relative ease from a variety of people, which, according to them, includes, but is not limited to, demographic and lifestyle information, attitudes, and intentions. This explains why Sobowale (1983) argued that the survey technique is the most commonly used by behavioural scientists. The area studied in this work consisted of practising journalists in Nigeria. However, the physical setting of this study was made up of practising journalists operating in the five states of South East Nigeria, namely: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States. The population of the study was 1,315, as represented in the table below:

Sample of registered NUJ members in South East states

S/N	States	No. of Registered Journalists
1	Abia	170
2	Anambra	525
3	Ebonyi	150
4	Enugu	250
5	Imo	220
Total		1,315

Source: NUJ Secretariats in the five States in South East Nigeria

A sample size of 600 was arrived at using Fisher's formula for determining sample size when the population is below 10,000. Based on the suggestion by Stacks and Hocking (1999) that "the larger the sample, the more representative of the population the sample will be, and the smaller your error will be," and the suggestion by Nwuneli (1991) that "the bigger the sample, the better for statistical inference," a sample of 600 was decided upon. Because the population of the journalists in the sampled states differs in number, approximately 65% of the population in each of the selected three states of Anambra, Enugu, and Ebonyi were selected to proportionally represent the number of journalists in those states, as represented below:

Sampled States and Journalists

S/N	States	Registered Journalists	Samples
1	Anambra	525	341
2	Enugu	250	162
3	Ebonyi	150	97
Total		925	600

The sampling technique used for this study was the probability sampling technique. Moreover, simple random sampling, a branch of the probability sampling technique, was employed because it afforded every element in the population an equal chance of being selected. This means that journalists operating within the area under consideration had an equal chance of being selected. In selecting the representative sample for this study, the journalists were selected with the criteria that a respondent must be a practising journalist in any of the states in the South East Geopolitical Zone and either a member of the Nigerian Union of Journalists or practising outside the union. Based on the above criteria, journalists operating in three of the five states in South East Nigeria were selected, namely Anambra, Ebonyi, and Enugu States. The three states were randomly selected to represent the whole of the South East states.

The instruments of data collection were an interview guide and an 18-item pre-coded questionnaire. Items in the questionnaire and the interview guide addressed the variables related to the research questions formulated for this study. The questionnaire was divided into six sections. The first section contained questions addressing the demographics of the respondents, such as sex, media affiliation, and educational qualification. The second section contained questions addressing journalists' knowledge of the FOI Act. The third section had questions that established the extent of use of the FOI Act by journalists in South East Nigeria. The fourth section delved into journalists' perception of the utilisation of the FOI Act. The fifth section explored the challenges of using the FOI Act in relation to ethical journalism practice. The sixth section delved into the implications of the FOI Act for ethical journalism practice.

Data Analysis and Results

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data generated using the survey research method. The data collected using the questionnaire were presented in frequency distribution tables. These were used to obtain the frequencies and percentages of occurrence. The implications of the data presented using the above tool were also highlighted.

Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	230	38.3
Female	370	61.7
Highest Edu. Qualification		
WAEC/SSCE	112	18.7
OND/NCE	262	43.7
BSc/BA/BED	156	26.0
MA and above	70	11.6
Ownership Pattern of Media Organisations		
Affiliated to		
Federal	352	58.7
State	166	27.7
Private	82	13.6

N=600

The data in the table above indicate a significant disparity between the sexes of the respondents in the study, with female respondents outnumbering male respondents. The data also suggest that most of the journalists studied have insufficient formal educational training for the role of a journalist, indicating that many of them rely on on-the-job training to perform their duties. Furthermore, the data suggest a higher proportion of journalists employed by the government compared to those employed in the private sector.

Table II: Respondents' level of knowledge and understanding of FOI Act provisions

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Do you understand the provisions of the Act?		
Yes	292	48.7
No	268	44.7
Can't say	40	6.6
Level of knowledge of the provisions of Act		
High	60	10.0
Very high	222	37.0
Low	100	16.7
Very low	58	9.6
Can't say	160	26.7

N=600

The data in the table above indicate that there was not a significant difference between those who understood the provisions of the Act and those who did not. The data show that those with a very high knowledge of the provisions of the Act make up the largest group of journalists studied, although this is not significant enough, as it remains below average.

Table III: Respondents' utilization of the provisions of the FOI Act

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Have you requested for government-held information using the provisions of FOI Act?		
Yes	252	42
No	348	58
Can't say	-	-
How often have you used FOI Act in getting government-held information?		
Regularly	90	15
Occasionally	234	39
Rarely	168	28
Never	108	18
How often do you use the provisions of the Act to request for government-held information?		
Always	96	16
Once in a while	150	25
As the need arises	228	38
Can't say	126	21
What is the extent of use of the Act by journalists?		
High	138	23
Moderate	198	33
Low	264	44

N=600

The data indicate that the majority of journalists were not making adequate use of the Act, as evidenced by the preponderance of those who had not used the Act to request government-held information, compared to those who had done so. The data also show the under-utilisation of the Act by journalists, as only 15 percent of respondents had used it regularly to request government-held information, compared to 39 percent, 28 percent, and 18 percent who had used it occasionally, rarely, and never, respectively, to obtain such information. Furthermore, the data imply that journalists are not committed to the practice of investigative journalism, in which the FOI Act is crucial. In addition, the data suggest that journalists are under-utilising the Act.

Table IV: Respondents' perception of the utilization of the FOI Act

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Has FOI Act improved the quality of reportage by journalists?		
Yes	174	29
No	264	44
Don't know	162	27
Has FOI Act improved the quality of reportage by journalists?		
Yes	186	31
No	216	36
Don't know	198	33
Are records and information which were inaccessible before accessible now due to FOI Act?		
Yes	246	41
No	156	26
Don't know	198	33
Is the FOI Act an important document that can strengthen investigative journalism?		
Yes	150	25
No	206	34.3
Don't know	244	40.7
Are there challenges impeding the utilization of the FOI Act by journalists		
Yes	288	48
No	162	27
Don't know	150	25

N=600

The data indicate a significant difference between the number of respondents who believed the Act had improved the quality of journalism practice and those who held a contrary view. The data also revealed a preponderance of journalists who stated that, with the FOI Act in place, access to government-held information and records had improved, compared to those who disagreed. Furthermore, the data suggest that a significant number of respondents were unaware of the state of access to public records and information before the enactment of the FOI Law. Similarly, the data in the table above indicate that a significant number of respondents did not understand the contents of the Act. In addition, the data reveal a preponderance of respondents who believed there were challenges impeding the utilisation of the FOI Act, compared to those who stated there were no challenges hindering the utilisation of the Act by journalists.

Table V: Responses on the impediments to the utilization of the Act and Responses on the challenges faced by journalists in accessing government-held information

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
What are the impediments to the utilization of FOI Act?		
Constitutional provisions	54	9
Custodians of public information and records	42	7
Government/political actors	54	9
The press/journalists themselves	42	7
The judiciary	54	9
The society	54	9
All of the above	126	21
None of the above	72	12
Don't know	102	17
What challenges do you face in accessing government-held information?		
Access is denied	78	13
No feedback	180	30
Information is partial released	126	21

N=600

Table V above shows that a variety of factors inhibit the utilisation of the Act. The data indicate that different respondents faced different challenges in accessing government-held information.

Table VI: Responses on the implications of the Act for ethical journalism practice

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Does the existence of the Act have implications for ethical journalism practice?		
Yes	252	42
No	162	27
Don't know	186	31
What are the implications of the Act for ethical journalism practice?		
Brought an end to speculative journalism	168	28
Made the job of the journalist easier	102	17
Made the job of the journalist more demanding	108	18
Made the journalist more responsible	132	22
Don't know	90	15

N=600

The data indicate a preponderance of respondents who believed that the Act had implications for ethical journalism practice, compared to those who held a contrary view. The data show divergent interpretations of the ethical implications of the Act by the respondents. The ethics of journalism practice does not permit the invasion of individuals' privacy, and this is where the FOI Act and journalistic ethics converge. Section 14(1) of the FOI Act forbids public institutions from releasing personal information. However, subsection 2 of the same section provides that personal information may be disclosed if the individual to whom the information relates gives consent for its disclosure, or if the information is already in the public domain.

Discussion of Findings

From the data gathered, while 55% of the respondents were aware of the FOI Act, 63% had read it, whereas 48.7% understood its provisions. This level of awareness and knowledge was also evident from the interviews with editors and senior reporters, as all of them were aware of the Act's existence. However, three out of the six interviewees appeared knowledgeable about the provisions of the Act, though their opinions suggested that the level of awareness and knowledge in the South East was low. This finding supports the studies of Nsereka and Ammanah (2014), Abone and Kur (2014), and Oberiri (2016), who found a high level of awareness and knowledge of the FOI Act in Rivers, Anambra, and Taraba States, respectively. However, it contrasts with the study by Ezinwa, Ngwu, and Onah (2014), which found a low level of understanding of the FOI Act in South East Nigeria.

Furthermore, only 42% of the respondents reported having used the Act to request government-held information, compared to 58% who had not. Also, only 39% believed journalists were making adequate use of the Act, whereas 38% disagreed, and 23% were unsure. Interviews with editors and senior reporters confirmed the low utilisation of the Act. This finding is consistent with Aliede (2021), Guyson, Jamo, and Yakubu's (2017), and Dunu and Ugbo's (2014) studies, which found minimal use of the Act by journalists in South East, North Central, and other regions of Nigeria. The reasons for this low utilisation were further supported by the challenges enumerated by editors and senior reporters during interviews.

Moreover, 61.3% of the respondents said the Act was not enforceable among journalists, compared to 16.7% who said it was enforceable. This aligns with Nnadi and Obot's (2014) study, where 30.7% of journalists said the Act was enforceable, while 69.3% disagreed. Additionally, 29% of respondents believed the Act had improved the quality of reportage by journalists, while 44% disagreed. This finding was supported by a senior reporter, who described the Act as "a toothless bulldog." Other findings from Table Six revealed that 41% and 26% of respondents said records and information that were previously inaccessible were now accessible and inaccessible, respectively. Additionally, 25% and 34.3% of respondents saw the FOI Act as something that could strengthen investigative journalism, while the remainder disagreed. These findings are consistent with Dunu and Ugbo's (2014) study, which found that 34% of respondents believed the FOI Act had enhanced access to information, while 66% disagreed. However, a finding of this study contradicts Dunu and Ugbo's (2014) study, where 82% of respondents viewed the Act as an investigative tool in news gathering, compared to 18% who did not. This study's findings align more with Odiegwu-Enwerem, Adelakun, Aliede, and Ambassador-Brikins (2021) and Ezinwa, Ngwu, and Onah's (2014) study, in which 67.6% of respondents disagreed that the Act had the capacity to strengthen investigative journalism.

Furthermore, 48% of respondents said there were challenges hindering the utilisation of the FOI Act by journalists, while 27% disagreed, and 25% were unsure. The challenges cited included denied access (13%), lack of feedback (30%), partial release of information (21%), and uncertainty (36%). The qualitative data from interviews with editors and senior reporters further corroborate these challenges, as shown in Table Seven. This finding is consistent with Dunu and Ugbo's (2014) study, which found that 85% of respondents reported challenges in using the FOI Act, while 15% disagreed.

Additionally, 42% of respondents believed the existence of the FOI Act had implications for journalism practice, compared to 27% who disagreed and 31% who were unsure. Specific implications of the Act for journalism practice included the view that it had ended speculative journalism (28%), made journalists' jobs easier (17%), made their jobs more demanding (18%), and made journalists more responsible (22%). These data align with the insights gathered during interviews, where most editors and senior reporters noted that the Act would encourage journalists to be more responsible and uphold objectivity and accuracy.

Conclusion

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that while awareness and knowledge of the provisions of the FOI Act are high, they do not necessarily translate into its adequate use by journalists. The FOI Act, though a significant tool for democratising access to government-held information and records, still faces challenges in implementation in Nigeria and other nations that have enacted similar laws.

Recommendations

In line with the major findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. All practising journalists should thoroughly study the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act to become well-versed in its provisions.
2. Journalists should move beyond complacency and make full use of the Act, applying its provisions in investigative journalism.
3. The Nigerian government, at both federal and state levels, should repeal or amend existing laws and administrative bottlenecks that hinder the full implementation of the FOI Act.
4. All states in Nigeria especially within the study should immediately domesticate the FOI Act to facilitate its implementation across the country.

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