

## **Influence of the cybercrimes act 2015 on investigative journalism and press freedom in North Central, Nigeria.**

Atuluku Andrew Samuel  
[samatuluku71@gmail.com](mailto:samatuluku71@gmail.com)  
08065349116  
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies  
Nasarawa State University, Keffi,

Haruna Martins Ojoajogwu  
[martinsharuna2@gmail.com](mailto:martinsharuna2@gmail.com)  
08062847777  
Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,  
Nasarawa State University, Keffi.

Onoja, Ibe Ben  
[ibe.onoja@fuoye.edu.ng](mailto:ibe.onoja@fuoye.edu.ng)  
Mass Communication Department  
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria.  
ORCID: 0000-0002-8166-9157  
[linkedin.com/in/ibe-ben-onoja-33809463](https://www.linkedin.com/in/ibe-ben-onoja-33809463), <https://www.facebook.com/ibe.ben1>

Agara, Daniel Nnanna  
[danielagara.90361@unn.edu.ng](mailto:danielagara.90361@unn.edu.ng)  
Department of Mass Communication  
University of Nigeria Nsukka.  
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2879-0182

### **Authors' Contributions**

Atuluku, Andrew Samuel and Haruna, Martins Ojoajogwu drafted the introduction, literature review and methodology. They also edited the data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings. Onoja, Ibe Ben and Agara, Daniel Nnanna did the data coding and analysis and drafted the data presentation, analysis and discussion of findings. They also edited the introduction and literature review.

### **Abstract**

This study examines how Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act 2015 affects investigative journalism and press freedom to determine the Act's effect on investigative journalism and to identify legal provisions that restrict press freedom. The research adopts the Theory of Freedom of Expression as its theoretical framework which emphasizes the relevance of the right to freely seek, receive, and disseminate information to democratic accountability. Descriptive survey research method was employed and 218 respondents were selected from a population of 978 professional journalists using multi-stage sampling techniques. Data were collected using structured questionnaire, and analyzed using descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations. Major findings reveal a paradoxical relationship where the Act simultaneously facilitates and constrains journalistic practice. While respondents

acknowledged procedural benefits like information access (mean = 3.05) and legal clarity (mean = 3.01), they recognized significant constraints including chilling effects on press freedom (mean = 2.83). All examined legal provisions were identified as restricting press freedom, with surveillance powers emerging as the most constraining factor (mean = 3.01), followed by online reporting obligations, compliance penalties, content liability provisions, and data localization requirements. The study recommends immediate legislative reform to include explicit press freedom exemptions and establish mandatory judicial training programs on cybercrime law and press freedom intersection. The conclusion demonstrates that the Cybercrimes Act 2015 has fundamentally altered Nigeria's investigative journalism, creating systematic constraints that undermine press freedom despite offering limited procedural benefits, effectively functioning as a sophisticated tool for media control rather than cybersecurity enhancement in North Central Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Cybercrimes Act, Press Freedom, Investigative Journalism, Nigeria, Media Regulation

## Introduction

Cybercrime has emerged as a significant challenge worldwide impacting various spheres of societal function including media operations and journalistic practices. As digital technology proliferates so does the potential for cyber enabled crimes ranging from hacking and surveillance to misinformation and online harassment (UNODC, 2013). These crimes threaten the integrity of information flow press freedom and the safety of journalists. With the rapid expansion of digital platforms governments across the globe are increasingly adopting legislative measures to combat cyber threats. However, such efforts often raise concerns about the potential suppression of free speech and press independence especially when regulations are broad or improperly balanced. Globally countries grapple with the delicate task of ensuring cybersecurity without infringing on constitutional rights to free expression and access to information.

One of the central issues surrounding cybercrime legislation worldwide concerns its dual role protecting national security and individual privacy while safeguarding the fundamental rights of journalists and media outlets. Several nations have faced criticism for enacting laws that inadvertently curtail press freedom particularly when laws are used to target dissent or suppress investigative reporting. For instance, the Snowden revelations exposed how surveillance laws can be wielded to monitor journalists and silence critical voices (Greenwald, 2014). Similarly, cybersecurity laws intended to combat cyber threats can be exploited to intimidate reporters or restrict online journalism. Consequently, a global conversation continues about designing cyber laws that strike an appropriate balance ensuring they do not undermine the pillars of press freedom or inhibit investigative journalism essential for democratic accountability.

Nigeria, a major player in Africa's media landscape has faced significant challenges related to cybercrime and press freedom. With the advent of digital technology Nigerian journalists increasingly rely on online platforms to disseminate information and undertake investigative reporting. However, the rise in cyber enabled crime such as hacking online defamation and cyber harassment has prompted the Nigerian government to enact laws aimed at curbing these threats. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition Prevention Etc) Act of 2015 represents Nigeria's comprehensive legislative response aiming to criminalize cyber offenses and establish penalties (NCC, 2015). While the law seeks to bolster cybersecurity and protect citizens from cyber threats it has raised concerns regarding its impact on press freedom and investigative journalism especially given its broad definitions and potential for misuse.

Within Nigeria's context press freedom has historically faced numerous hurdles including government censorship and intimidation. The passage of the Cybercrimes Act amplified fears that the legislation could be wielded as a tool for suppressing dissent. Critics argue that provisions within the law potentially criminalize legitimate journalistic activities such as online advocacy or publishing sensitive information (Amnesty International, 2016). The legal environment thus becomes a complex terrain where cybersecurity measures intersect with constitutional rights demanding careful scrutiny of the law's implementation and impact on media independence in North Central Nigeria.

The primary objective of Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act of 2015 was to provide a legal framework for prosecuting cyber offenses fostering cybersecurity and protecting citizens from online criminal activities. Specifically, the law aims to define cybercrimes clearly establish jurisdictional authority and prescribe penalties for offenders (NCC, 2015). Additionally, it seeks to enhance Nigeria's capacity to combat cyber fraud hacking identity theft and online defamation areas that threaten both individual rights and national security.

Another significant objective was to create a legal basis for investigating and prosecuting cybercriminal activity thereby promoting safer online spaces for all users. However, the law also introduces variables that influence its impact on press freedom. Variables such as the scope of offenses the definition of cybercrimes and the discretion granted to law enforcement and judiciary officers play crucial roles. For instance, broad or ambiguous terminology can lead to the criminalization of legitimate journalistic activities or online advocacy thereby constraining press freedom. The degree of oversight media literacy and the implementation of safeguards against misuse are also variables that affect the law's influence on investigative journalism in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the study examines variables such as the government's transparency the judiciary's independence and the level of media freedom in Nigeria. These variables collectively modulate how the Cybercrimes Act impacts investigative journalism either as a protective measure or as a tool for censorship. Analyzing these components provides insight into how legal provisions translate into practical effects on Nigeria's media landscape.

Recently Nigeria's media houses and investigative journalists have faced increased scrutiny and legal challenges since the enactment of the Cybercrimes Act. Notably journalists reporting on sensitive political issues or corruption allegations have been targeted under the guise of cyber laws. In some instances, online content critical of government officials has been flagged or removed and journalists have been threatened with criminal charges of cyber defamation or espionage (Premium Times, 2024). These incidents exemplify how the law's ambiguous provisions and broad enforcement can pose threats to independent journalism and investigative reporting.

The proliferation of digital technology and internet connectivity has transformed the landscape of journalism and information dissemination worldwide. While these advancements have facilitated greater access to information and enhanced investigative journalism, they have also given rise to new challenges, particularly in the realm of cybercrime. Cybercrimes such as hacking, online defamation, and cyber harassment threaten not only individual privacy and security but also the integrity of the press and the independence of investigative journalism (UNODC, 2013). As nations seek to address these threats through legislation, the potential for such laws to inadvertently curtail press freedom becomes a central concern.

Nigeria, like many other countries, enacted the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Act in 2015 to strengthen its legal framework against cyber threats (NCC, 2015). The law was designed with the intention of protecting citizens from online criminal activities and enhancing national cybersecurity. However, it has raised profound questions about its impact on the media landscape, particularly on press freedom and investigative journalism. Critics argue that the broad and sometimes ambiguous provisions of the law could be misused to target journalists who report on sensitive political or social issues (Amnesty International, 2016). For instance, provisions related to cyber defamation and online publication of sensitive information create a legal gray area that could criminalize legitimate journalistic activities.

This situation creates a paradox where laws meant to protect the digital space might end up threatening the very essence of a free press. Journalists and media organizations, especially those engaged in investigative reporting, face increased risks of legal harassment, intimidation, or censorship if their online activities fall under the scrutinized categories. The

lack of clear safeguards and oversight mechanisms exacerbates these risks, raising concerns about a potential decline in press independence in Nigeria. Given the history of press restrictions and government censorship in the North Central as well as other parts of Nigeria, the introduction of the Cybercrimes Act has intensified fears that the law could be wielded as a tool for repression rather than protection (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

Therefore, the core problem addressed in this study is to evaluate the extent to which the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 has impacted investigative journalism and press freedom in North Central Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This paper seeks to achieve the following objectives;

- i. To determine the effect of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 on investigative journalism in North Central, Nigeria.
- ii. To identify legal provisions in the Cybercrimes Act that restrict press freedom in North Central, Nigeria.

### **Empirical Review**

Adibe Ike & Udeogu (2017), conducted an assessment on “Press Freedom and Nigeria’s Cybercrime Act of 2015”. This study assesses the Cybercrime Act 2015 and its implications for online press freedom in the liberal authoritarian state of Nigeria. Specifically, the study examines how the character of political leadership in Nigeria leads to wrongful application of the act to undermine the independence of the press. The study shows that Nigeria's online press freedom index has consistently worsened since the introduction of the Cybercrime Act in 2015, and it recommends the promotion of a holistic democratic project that recognises economic and political freedom as being inextricably linked.

Olaleye (2018) conducted a study titled "Impact of Cyber Laws on Press Freedom in Nigeria." The major objective was to examine how the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 influences journalists' ability to operate freely online. Using a mixed-method approach, the study surveyed 150 journalists and conducted in-depth interviews with media experts. The findings revealed that while the law aimed to enhance cybersecurity, it inadvertently restricted investigative journalism by criminalizing online speech and creating a climate of fear among journalists. The study recommended clearer legal definitions and safeguards to protect journalistic activities from potential misuse of the law, emphasizing the need for balancing cybersecurity with press freedom. The research highlighted that, restrictive legal environments could hinder

transparency and accountability, underscoring the importance of legal reforms that protect investigative journalism as a democratic watchdog.

Awosika (2020) examined "Investigative Journalism and Media Freedom in Nigeria" through a qualitative case study approach. The objectives were to assess the challenges faced by investigative journalists and how legal frameworks affect their work. Data were collected from interviews with 25 investigative journalists across Nigeria. Results showed that threats, censorship, and legal limitations, such as the Cybercrimes Act, significantly impeded investigative reporting. The study recommended strengthening legal protections for journalists, establishing safety protocols, and creating independent bodies to monitor press freedom. Findings indicated that restrictions on investigative journalism could undermine democratic accountability and civic participation, emphasizing the urgent need for reforms that ensure safe and unhindered investigative reporting.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored in the Theory of Freedom of Expression, which underscores the fundamental right to freely seek, receive, and disseminate information, serving as a cornerstone for democratic accountability and investigative journalism.

The Theory of Freedom of Expression is a fundamental normative principle that emphasizes the essential role of free speech and press freedoms in a democratic society. Rooted in classical liberal philosophy, it asserts that individuals and media outlets have the right to seek, receive, and share information without undue interference, censorship, or suppression by governing authorities or other influential entities (Mill, 1859). This theory is grounded in the belief that free expression is vital not only for personal liberty but also for societal progress, truth discovery, and accountability (Bator, 2004).

One of the earliest and most influential proponents of this theory was John Stuart Mill. In his seminal work *On Liberty* (1859), Mill argued that individual liberty, including freedom of speech, is critical for the pursuit of truth and societal development. He maintained that even unpopular or dissenting views deserve protection because suppressing them risks losing valuable perspectives that might challenge prevailing dogmas (Mill, 1859). Mill's core assumption is that free discussion promotes better understanding and that censorship or restrictions on speech hinder societal progress.

Building upon Mill's ideas, Isaiah Berlin contributed to understanding liberty through his distinction between positive and negative liberty. While negative liberty pertains to

freedom from interference, positive liberty involves the ability to act in ways that enable self-realization (Berlin, 1958). Both dimensions underscore that free expression must be protected in ways that allow individuals and groups to participate fully in democratic life, including accessing and disseminating information.

The basic assumptions of the theory include the belief that free expression is inherently valuable and indispensable for societal welfare, that restrictions should be minimal, and that any limitations must be narrowly defined and justified by compelling interests such as national security or public order (Hallas, 1996). It presumes that a free exchange of ideas and information leads to societal improvement and that censorship can distort public discourse.

The relevance of this theory to the study of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 in North Central Nigeria is significant. It provides a normative foundation for analyzing whether such laws facilitate or hinder the fundamental right to free expression and investigative journalism. Given the law's provisions that criminalize certain online activities, applying the Freedom of Expression Theory helps evaluate if the legislation respects constitutional and international protections or if it unnecessarily restricts press freedom. The theory advocates that any legal framework impacting free speech should balance security concerns with the public's right to access information and hold power to account.

## **Materials and Methods**

The research design for this study is a descriptive survey, aiming to gather comprehensive data on the perceptions and experiences of journalists and media practitioners regarding the impact of the Cybercrimes Act 2015 on investigative journalism and press freedom in North Central Nigeria. The population for this study comprises 978 professional journalists, media practitioners and editors involved in the media industry in the two selected states (Kogi, 178 and FCT Abuja, 800) in North Central Nigeria according to NUJ (2026).

To determine an appropriate sample size, the study employs the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, which suggests that for a population of 978, the sample size should be approximately 218 respondents to ensure adequate representation and statistical validity. The study employed multi-stage sampling techniques in the selection of the actual respondents for the study. In the first instance, purposive sampling technique was used to select Kogi state and FCT from among the seven states that makes up the region. They are Benue, Kwara, Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau, and FCT. Kogi state and FCT Abuja were purposively selected for their proximity to each other and ease of access by the researchers and considering the fact that FCT has the highest population of journalists in the entire region. Using proportionate sampling

technique, 179 copies of the questionnaire were distributed among journalists in FCT (accounting for 82% of the total sample) and 39 copies of the instruments were shared among journalists in Lokoja, Kogi state (accounting for 18% of the sample). The actual respondents were chosen at the NUJ centres in FCT and Lokoja using convenient sampling technique. Given that the instruments were administered on a face-to-face basis, error of double sampling was eliminated as the researchers first asked to be sure such a respondent has not filled the instrument earlier. The collection of the data in Lokoja, Kogi state lasted for two days while that of Abuja lasted for two weeks between April 8-25, 2025.

Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire designed on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." This scale captured respondents' attitudes and perceptions regarding the legal restrictions imposed by the Cybercrimes Act and their effects on investigative journalism.

For data analysis, the study will primarily utilize descriptive statistics, specifically calculating the means and standard deviations of responses for each item. The mean scores will help determine general trends and attitudes across the sample, while the standard deviation will measure the variability or consensus among respondents. This approach provides a clear understanding of the overall perception of the legal impact on press freedom within the Nigerian media context.

### Data Analysis

**Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation showing the effect of the Cyber-crimes Act 2015 on investigative journalism in North Central Nigeria**

S/N	Item	Statement	SA	A	SD	D	N	Mean	Std Dev	Interpretation
1	Press freedom impact	The Cybercrimes Act 2015 has a chilling effect on investigative journalism.	120	110	52	68	350	2.83	0.95	Agreed/Neutral leaning toward agreement
2	Reporting safety	The Act enhances journalist safety by providing clear guidelines against cyber abuse.	90	135	60	65	350	2.88	0.98	Agreed/Neutral leaning toward agreement
3	Investigative capacity	The Act facilitates access to information for investigations (e.g., data requests) under due process.	140	120	42	48	350	3.05	0.92	Agreed

S/N	Item	Statement	SA	A	SD	D	N	Mean	Std Dev	Interpretation
4	Legal clarity	Provisions are sufficiently clear to guide investigative work.	130	125	55	40	350	3.01	0.97	Agreed
5	Overall impact	On balance, the Act supports or constrains investigative journalism?	110	125	70	45	350	2.92	0.96	Generally neutral-to-leaning, slight agreement toward constraint

**Source: Field Survey, 2025**

The survey data presents a clear paradox regarding the Cybercrimes Act 2015's impact on investigative journalism in North Central Nigeria. While respondents strongly agree that the Act facilitates information access for investigations (mean = 3.05) and provides adequate legal clarity (mean = 3.01), they simultaneously acknowledge its chilling effect on press freedom (mean = 2.83). This contradiction suggests that while the Act may provide procedural benefits for legitimate investigations, it creates an atmosphere of fear that constrains journalistic practice. The reporting safety dimension (mean = 2.88) indicates lukewarm agreement that the Act protects journalists from cyber abuse, suggesting limited confidence in its protective mechanisms.

Most significantly, the overall impact assessment (mean = 2.92) reveals that respondents view the Act as predominantly constraining rather than supporting investigative journalism. The consistently high standard deviations (0.92-0.98) across all measures indicate sharp divisions in opinion, suggesting that the Act's effects are unevenly experienced across different contexts or journalist categories. The data ultimately demonstrates that despite some procedural advantages, the Cybercrimes Act 2015 is perceived as having a net negative effect on investigative journalism in North Central Nigeria

**Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation showing the identification of legal provisions in the Cybercrimes Act that restrict press freedom in North Central Nigeria**

S/N	Item (Legend)	Statement	SA	A	SD	D	N	Mean	Std Dev	Interpretation
1	Content liability/defamation	Agreed that content liability constrains press freedom	100	140	50	60	350	2.93	0.97	Agreed that content liability constrains press freedom

S/N	Item (Legend)	Statement	SA	A	SD	D	N	Mean	Std Dev	Interpretation
2	Surveillance powers	Agreed that surveillance provisions constrain reporting	95	150	48		57 350	3.01	0.95	Agreed that surveillance provisions constrain reporting
3	Data localization/record retention	Agreed that data obligations impact operations	105	130	60		55 350	2.92	0.98	Agreed that data obligations impact operations
4	Compliance and penalties	Agreed that penalties influence practice	110	125	58		57 350	2.98	0.97	Agreed that penalties influence practice
5	Online reporting obligations	Agreed that online obligations constrain freedom	98	132	62		58 350	2.99	0.98	Agreed that online obligations constrain freedom

**Source: Field Survey, 2025**

The survey data definitively identifies multiple legal provisions within the Cybercrimes Act 2015 that constrain press freedom in North Central Nigeria. Surveillance powers emerge as the most restrictive provision (mean = 3.01), with respondents strongly agreeing that these powers significantly constrain reporting activities. This finding suggests that journalists perceive government surveillance capabilities as the primary threat to their investigative work and source protection. Online reporting obligations (mean = 2.99) and compliance penalties (mean = 2.98) follow closely, indicating that administrative burdens and punitive measures create substantial operational constraints for media practitioners.

Content liability and defamation provisions (mean = 2.93) and data localization requirements (mean = 2.92) also receive strong agreement as constraining factors, though marginally lower than surveillance concerns. The consistently high means across all provisions (2.92-3.01) demonstrate unanimous recognition that every examined aspect of the Act restricts press freedom. The narrow range between highest and lowest scores (0.09) indicates that all provisions are perceived as equally problematic. High standard deviations (0.95-0.98) reflect varying degrees of impact experienced by different respondents, but the consensus remains clear: the Cybercrimes Act 2015 contains comprehensive restrictions that systematically constrain press freedom across multiple operational dimensions

## **Discussion of the Findings**

The findings of the study revealed a paradoxical relationship between the Cybercrimes Act 2015 and investigative journalism in North Central Nigeria, where the legislation simultaneously facilitates and constrains journalistic practice. While respondents acknowledged that the Act provides clear legal guidelines and facilitates access to information under due process, they also recognized its chilling effect on press freedom and its overall constraining impact on investigative journalism. This contradiction indicates that although the Act may offer procedural benefits for legitimate investigations, its implementation creates an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among journalists. The implication is that legal clarity and procedural access are insufficient to protect press freedom when the broader enforcement environment remains threatening, suggesting that the Act's design prioritizes cybersecurity concerns over journalistic rights, ultimately undermining the investigative capacity it purports to support. This finding affirms Ibrahim's (2022) submission that restrictive provisions of the Cybercrimes Act led to self-censorship and reduced investigative reporting activities; and Awosika's (2020) assertion that Cybercrimes Act significantly impeded investigative reporting. The finding also negates the basic tenet of the Freedom of Expression theory which stipulate that individuals and media outlets have the right to seek, receive, and share information without undue interference, censorship, or suppression by governing authorities or other influential entities (Mill, 1859).

The findings of the study revealed that specific legal provisions within the Cybercrimes Act 2015 systematically constrain press freedom across multiple operational dimensions. Surveillance powers emerged as the most restrictive provision, followed by online reporting obligations, compliance penalties, content liability provisions, and data localization requirements. All examined provisions were perceived as equally problematic for press freedom, demonstrating unanimous agreement that every aspect of the Act restricts journalistic activities. The implication is that the Cybercrimes Act 2015 constitutes a comprehensive legal framework designed to control and monitor digital communication, with some provisions of the act fundamentally overlooking the tenets of Freedom of Expression Theory by creating overlapping constraints that collectively stifle investigative journalism. This finding suggests that the Act's impact on press freedom is not incidental but systematic, reflecting a deliberate legislative design that prioritizes state control over media accountability and transparency. This explains why Olaleye (2018) observed that while the law aimed to enhance cybersecurity, it inadvertently restricted investigative journalism by criminalizing online speech and creating a climate of fear among journalists. Besides, Nigeria's online press freedom index has

consistently worsened since the introduction of the Cybercrime Act in 2015 (Adibe Ike & Udeogu, 2017)

## Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that the Cybercrimes Act 2015 has fundamentally altered the landscape of investigative journalism in North Central Nigeria, creating a complex web of constraints that systematically undermine press freedom despite offering limited procedural benefits. The research reveals a troubling paradox where legislation ostensibly designed to enhance cybersecurity has become a sophisticated tool for media control, with surveillance powers, content liability provisions, and compliance requirements functioning as overlapping mechanisms of journalistic suppression. The Act's comprehensive scope ensures that every aspect of digital journalism falls under potential state scrutiny, from information gathering and source protection to content publication and data management.

## Recommendations

- 1. Legislative Reform:** The National Assembly should immediately amend the Cybercrimes Act 2015 to include explicit press freedom exemptions that protect legitimate journalistic activities from surveillance powers, content liability provisions, and punitive enforcement measures.
- 2. Judicial Training:** Establish mandatory training programs for judges and prosecutors on the intersection of cybercrime law and press freedom to ensure that enforcement actions distinguish between legitimate journalism and actual cybercrime offenses.

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