

## Challenges and Prospects of Newspaper Coverage of Human Rights Issues in Nigeria

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the challenges and prospects of newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria. Drawing on relevant academic literature and media theories, the study analyses professional, political, structural, and economic factors that constrain comprehensive and effective reporting. Key challenges identified include limited human rights literacy among journalists, ethical and editorial constraints, political interference, restrictive legal frameworks, commercial pressures, and source dependency, which together result in episodic and cautious reporting. The paper also highlights prospects for improvement, including democratic consolidation, digital media convergence, active civil society engagement, professional training, and rising audience awareness, which collectively provide opportunities for more inclusive, analytical, and impactful coverage. The study highlights the critical role of newspapers in promoting public awareness, accountability, and social justice, and offers implications for journalism practice and media policy aimed at enhancing the normative function of the press in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** *Human rights, Nigerian newspapers, media coverage, journalism ethics, press freedom, digital media, civil society.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Human rights remain foundational to democratic governance, social justice, and the protection of human dignity. International human rights instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and regional frameworks, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, position human rights as essential benchmarks against which state and non-state actors are evaluated. In democratic societies, mass media serve as critical intermediaries in public discourse on human rights issues, informing citizens, holding power to account, and facilitating public deliberation on rights abuses and protections. Within this communicative ecosystem, newspapers, both traditional print and modern online editions, play indispensable roles in shaping civic awareness, framing societal concerns, and providing platforms for advocacy of rights.

In Nigeria, newspapers have historically functioned as agents of public scrutiny and political critique, particularly during periods of authoritarian rule and democratic transition. Research indicates that Nigerian newspapers engage with a variety of human rights themes, including police brutality, military conduct, child rights, and socio-economic rights, although the depth and prominence of such coverage vary significantly. Empirical studies suggest that while newspapers consistently report human rights issues, the frequency, placement, and analytical depth are often limited, with stories frequently relegated to inside pages and lacking sustained investigative treatment (e.g., Omobola, 2024).

Content analyses of Nigerian newspaper reporting demonstrate patterned approaches to specific rights issues. For example, studies on media framing of security forces' conduct reveal prevalent use of human-interest frames but limited contextualization of rights implications (Okeibunor et al., 2021), while research on police brutality reportage highlights frequent focus on extrajudicial themes without extensive critical analysis (Oginni & Romario,

2025). Other analyses underscore persistent editorial tendencies to rely on official sources and to center civil-political rights at the expense of socio-economic and legal frameworks in human rights reporting (e.g., human rights coverage trends in *The Punch* and *Daily Trust* from 2000–2015). (Farrau, 2016).

The conceptual premise of this paper is grounded in the recognition that newspaper coverage of human rights is not a neutral process. Instead, it reflects editorial priorities, professional norms, economic pressures, and broader political-institutional forces that shape how issues are selected, framed, and communicated to audiences. This aligns with Framing Theory, which posits that media do not merely report facts but actively construct meanings by selecting particular aspects of reality while downplaying others, thus influencing public interpretation and engagement with issues such as human rights. Additionally, Social Responsibility Theory emphasises normative expectations that the press should uphold ethical standards, promote social welfare, and provide balanced information to support democratic citizenship. Despite the recognised role of newspapers in human rights discourse, Nigerian media operate within contexts beset by political pressures, ownership influences, limited newsroom resources, and legal uncertainties that can constrain substantive coverage. These structural constraints often result in episodic, reactive reporting rather than sustained, analytical engagement with human rights issues. As a result, citizens may be deprived of comprehensive information necessary for meaningful participation in public debates on rights protections and accountability.

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to critically examine the challenges and prospects of newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria. Rather than documenting specific human rights violations, the analysis emphasises systemic patterns of coverage, editorial practices, and communicative dynamics that influence how human rights are

presented, interpreted, and understood within the Nigerian public sphere.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria requires a strong theoretical foundation that explicates both media behaviour and the socio-political environment in which journalists operate. This paper draws principally from Social Responsibility Theory, Framing Theory, and elements of the Political Economy of the Media to analyse how press structures, ethical norms, and interpretive choices shape human rights communication in Nigerian newspapers.

### 2.1 Social Responsibility Theory

Social Responsibility Theory articulates the normative expectations placed upon the press in democratic societies. Historically developed as a corrective to libertarian models of the press, Social Responsibility Theory holds that while media should enjoy freedom from undue interference, they must also serve the public good by providing accurate, balanced, and socially beneficial information (McQuail, 1987, as cited in Nigerian media literature). This theory implies that newspapers have an ethical obligation not only to inform citizens, but to facilitate public understanding of issues essential to democratic participation, including human rights concerns.

In the Nigerian context, studies on media ethics and responsible journalism corroborate the relevance of this theoretical lens. Research shows that although journalists demonstrate awareness of ethical standards, adherence is uneven due to editorial pressures, political influence, and weak enforcement mechanisms, impeding effective public service journalism (Alade et al., 2025). These findings highlight how ideal norms of Social Responsibility may be compromised in practice, affecting newspapers' ability to consistently foreground human rights issues in ways that advance civic awareness and accountability.

### 2.2 Framing Theory

Framing Theory conceptualises news as a process of selection and salience. Rather than simply mirroring reality, newspapers organise human rights issues through frames that define problems, suggest causes, make moral evaluations, and recommend solutions. Media frames therefore shape how audiences perceive and interpret human rights topics (Entman, 1993; Okeibunor, Omobola, & Adetunji, 2021). Empirical research in Nigeria underscores the utility of Framing Theory. Content analyses of newspaper reporting reveal that human rights issues are often framed through limited thematic lenses, with placement and narrative emphasis affecting public visibility and interpretation. For example, a study of *The Nation* and *Vanguard* newspapers found that human rights terms were covered frequently but tended to appear in inside pages and were dominated by specific content types such as news and opinion, suggesting constraints in how issues are highlighted and prioritised (Omobola, 2024).

Further, framing studies of Nigerian newspapers show how editorial choices can reflect broader political orientations and biases. Research on the framing of government conduct and human rights campaigns found that newspapers deploy a variety of interpretive frames, such as "resistance," "indifference," and "sympathetic," with partisan influences shaping how rights issues are presented to the public (Okeibunor et al., 2021). This reinforces the relevance of Framing Theory for analysing the interpretive logics by which newspapers construct human rights discourse.

### 2.3 Political Economy of the Media

While Social Responsibility and Framing theories explain normative and interpretive dimensions of human rights coverage, the Political Economy of the Media helps unpack structural influences on media content and professional practice (McQuail, 2010). This perspective views newspapers as economic and political entities embedded in wider systems of

ownership, market pressures, and power relations. In Nigeria, media ownership patterns, commercial imperatives, and political pressures have been documented as critical factors shaping editorial independence (Ayih, 2025).

For instance, the influence of political and commercial interests can distort news priorities and encourage self-censorship, particularly when coverage could antagonise powerful actors or jeopardise access to resources (Lawal, Babatunde, & Olaoye, 2025). Ethnographic reviews of ethical practices in Nigerian media argue that ownership influence, market-driven pressures, and commercialisation undermine media credibility and weaken commitment to ethical reporting, including on sensitive social issues such as human rights (Adejumo & Alabi, 2024).

Moreover, political laws and institutional environments also affect media autonomy. Literature on press freedom in Nigeria reveals that restrictive laws and state actions can intimidate media practitioners and inhibit robust reporting, factors that are directly relevant to how human rights issues are covered (Lawal, Babatunde, & Olaoye, 2025).

These theoretical lenses, this paper conceptualises newspaper coverage of human rights issues as the product of ethical norms, interpretive choices, and structural constraints within the Nigerian media ecology. Social Responsibility Theory provides ethical benchmarks and normative expectations for coverage; Framing Theory identifies the ways in which news texts shape public understanding; and Political Economy illuminates structural pressures that influence editorial decisions and professional practices.

This multi-theoretical framework allows for a holistic understanding of both the challenges that inhibit comprehensive human rights communication and the prospects that may enable newspapers to fulfil their democratic functions more effectively.

### **Overview of Newspaper Coverage of Human Rights Issues in Nigeria**

The coverage of human rights issues by Nigerian newspapers has evolved alongside the country's political history and media development. From the pre-independence period through military rule and into the current democratic era, newspapers have functioned as important platforms for articulating civic concerns and interrogating state conduct. Scholarly accounts of Nigerian journalism consistently identify the press as a key actor in rights awareness and democratic discourse, even as its effectiveness has varied across political contexts.

Historically, Nigerian newspapers were deeply involved in advocacy journalism, particularly during periods of authoritarian governance. Studies of the military era indicate that newspapers such as *The Guardian*, *Punch*, and *Vanguard* frequently foregrounded civil liberties, rule of law, and press freedom as part of broader struggles for democratic reform (Oso, 2012). This tradition established human rights as a legitimate and recurring theme within newspaper content, though often framed within oppositional or resistance narratives.

In the post-1999 democratic period, research suggests that Nigerian newspapers continue to report on human rights issues, but with noticeable shifts in emphasis and intensity. Content analyses reveal that coverage is largely event-driven and episodic, focusing on immediate developments rather than sustained thematic engagement. For example, Omobola (2024) found that while Nigerian newspapers regularly publish stories related to human rights issues, such reports are often limited in prominence and depth, with minimal follow up or contextual analysis.

Empirical studies also show that newspaper attention to human rights tends to privilege civil and political rights over economic, social, and cultural rights. Research examining coverage patterns in national dailies indicates that issues such as freedom of expression, policing, and governance receive greater attention than rights related to health, education, housing, or social welfare. This imbalance reflects both editorial

priorities and broader news values that favour conflict, elite actors, and official narratives (Oginni and Mizpah, 2025).

Another defining feature of newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria is heavy reliance on official and institutional sources. Studies on sourcing practices demonstrate that government officials, security agencies, and political elites dominate news narratives, while voices of affected communities, civil society organisations, and independent experts are comparatively marginalised. Okeibunor and colleagues (2021) argue that this source dependency constrains critical interrogation and limits the diversity of perspectives presented in human rights reporting.

Editorial genre also shapes the treatment of human rights issues in Nigerian newspapers. Research indicates that such issues appear more frequently in straight news reports and opinion columns than in investigative features or in-depth analyses. Editorials and commentaries often adopt normative positions that emphasise moral responsibility and national values, while news reports tend to present human rights issues within procedural or institutional frames. This pattern reinforces Framing Theory's assertion that the form of media texts significantly influences how issues are interpreted by audiences.

Despite these limitations, scholars note that Nigerian newspapers have contributed meaningfully to public awareness of human rights issues. Studies on media agenda setting show that sustained newspaper attention, even when limited in depth, can elevate rights related topics into national discourse and stimulate public debate. This underscores the continuing relevance of newspapers as agenda setters within Nigeria's media ecology, particularly among policy elites and opinion leaders.

The literature suggests that newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria is characterised by regular but constrained engagement. Coverage is shaped by historical traditions of advocacy journalism,

contemporary newsroom routines, and structural pressures that influence editorial priorities. This overview provides the contextual foundation for examining the specific challenges that limit effective coverage and the prospects that offer pathways for improvement, which are discussed in subsequent sections.

### **3. CHALLENGES OF NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES IN NIGERIA**

Newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria faces multiple interrelated challenges that are professional, structural, political, and economic in nature. These constraints significantly influence the selection, framing, and presentation of human rights topics, limiting the press's effectiveness as a platform for public awareness, civic engagement, and accountability.

#### **3.1 Professional and Ethical Constraints**

One major impediment is the limitations in journalistic professionalism and ethics. Research indicates that Nigerian journalists often lack specialised training in human rights reporting and critical analytical skills, resulting in coverage that is episodic, reactive, and largely event-driven (Omobola, 2024). For instance, while newspapers report on human rights events such as protests, policy changes, or judicial rulings, there is often insufficient attention to the legal, socio-political, and historical context of these issues. This gap undermines the press's capacity to educate the public and facilitate informed debate, a core tenet of Social Responsibility Theory (McQuail, 2010).

Ethical challenges are compounded by newsroom practices such as prioritising speed over accuracy, the limited editorial supervision in many media houses, and occasional engagement in "brown envelope journalism," which compromises independence and professional standards. According to Okeibunor et al. (2021), ethical lapses and

routine pressures create scenarios where human rights stories are reported superficially, reducing their potential for societal impact.

### **3.2 Political and Legal Pressures**

Political influence and restrictive legal frameworks present a second set of challenges. Although the Nigerian Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, laws such as the Cybercrime Act, criminal defamation statutes, and other security-related regulations have been inconsistently applied, often limiting journalists' autonomy (Lawal, Babatunde, & Olaoye, 2025). These instruments are frequently invoked selectively to intimidate media practitioners covering sensitive topics, including governance and human rights issues. Empirical studies show that political and legal pressures generate **self-censorship** and cautious editorial policies, whereby newspapers avoid critical reporting of government agencies or politically influential actors (Etumnu et al., 2025). Such pressures undermine the watchdog role of the press and compromise the framing of human rights issues, producing narratives that are neutral or non-confrontational even when deeper analysis is warranted.

### **3.3 Ownership Structure and Commercialisation**

A third challenge arises from the political economy of newspaper ownership and commercialisation. Media houses in Nigeria are often owned by business or political elites with vested interests that influence editorial agendas (Ayih, 2025). When ownership aligns with particular political or economic networks, newspapers may be discouraged from reporting extensively on human rights issues that could undermine these interests.

Commercial pressures also shape coverage priorities. Newspapers reliant on advertising revenue may favour stories that attract larger audiences, such as sensational crime or entertainment news, over investigative reporting that demands significant resources and may not have immediate market appeal

(Adejumo & Alabi, 2024). Consequently, human rights issues, which often require careful analysis and sustained attention, are deprioritised, reflecting structural limitations within the media industry that constrain normative commitments to Social Responsibility.

### **3.4 Source Dependency and Limited Diversity of Voices**

Another structural constraint is **overreliance on official and elite sources**. Studies show that Nigerian newspapers frequently prioritise statements from government officials, institutional authorities, and political elites, while marginalising perspectives from civil society, human rights organisations, and communities directly affected by rights issues (Okeibunor et al., 2021).

This reliance not only narrows the framing of human rights topics but also limits the diversity of narratives presented to the public. According to Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), the selection of sources inherently shapes the interpretation of events, potentially skewing public perception and limiting citizen engagement. The lack of alternative voices reduces the press's capacity to represent the full spectrum of societal experiences related to human rights, weakening its democratic function as a platform for inclusivity and accountability.

### **3.5 Safety Concerns and Professional Vulnerability**

Safety and risk perceptions represent a further challenge. Journalists covering politically or socially sensitive topics in Nigeria face threats, harassment, and, in some cases, physical violence. Research indicates that these conditions contribute to risk-averse behaviours, limiting investigative reporting and discouraging sustained coverage of contentious issues (Etumnu et al., 2025).

Professional vulnerability thus acts as both a practical and psychological constraint. Even in the absence of direct threats, the anticipation of

possible retaliation leads to defensive journalism, whereby reporters avoid in-depth analysis, critical questioning, or exposure of systemic rights issues. Such practices constrain the ability of newspapers to fulfil their role as independent and proactive agents of civic engagement.

### **3.6 Prospects of Newspaper Coverage of Human Rights Issues in Nigeria**

Despite the numerous challenges discussed previously, the Nigerian newspaper industry exhibits emerging prospects for enhanced coverage of human rights issues. These prospects stem from institutional developments, technological innovation, growing civil society engagement, professionalization of journalism, and evolving audience expectations. Understanding these prospects is critical for conceptualizing pathways to more robust and democratic media practice.

### **3.7 Democratic Consolidation and Expanding Civic Space**

The consolidation of democratic governance in Nigeria since 1999 has provided newspapers with a relatively freer space to report on human rights issues compared to the era of military rule. Studies indicate that the transition to democracy has strengthened constitutional protections for freedom of expression and press freedom, allowing newspapers to engage more critically with issues of governance, accountability, and citizens' rights (Ayinla, Olaseinde, & Ajilore, 2024).

This democratic space provides newspapers the normative and legal backing to pursue more rights-focused reporting, reflecting Social Responsibility Theory's principle that media should promote civic education and public welfare. While challenges persist, the institutionalization of democratic norms enhances the legitimacy of newspapers in framing human rights discourse and advocating for reforms.

### **3.8 Digital Convergence and Hybrid News Practices**

Technological innovations and the rise of digital media platforms offer significant opportunities for Nigerian newspapers to expand their coverage and reach. Online editions, social media integration, and multimedia storytelling enable newspapers to provide timely, interactive, and audience-engaged reporting on human rights issues (Okafor & Nwankwo, 2024).

Digital platforms facilitate investigative journalism, allow direct dissemination of information from affected communities, and enable real-time feedback from readers. This hybrid model supports more participatory approaches to human rights communication, encouraging newspapers to incorporate multiple perspectives and extend coverage beyond elite-centric narratives.

### **3.9 Growing Civil Society and NGO Engagement**

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and human rights NGOs play an increasingly influential role in shaping newspaper coverage. Empirical research shows that newspapers frequently source information from CSOs to report on issues such as gender rights, child protection, and socio-economic justice (Eze & Afolabi, 2023).

Partnerships between newspapers and rights-based organisations facilitate access to verified data, expert commentary, and case studies, enhancing the depth and credibility of reporting. By collaborating with civil society actors, newspapers can overcome source dependency limitations and present a more diverse and representative framing of human rights issues.

### **3.9 Professional Training and Ethical Reforms**

The professionalization of journalism in Nigeria provides another prospect for improving human rights coverage. Universities, media institutes, and professional bodies

increasingly offer specialized training in media ethics, investigative journalism, and rights reporting (Ogunyemi, 2017).

Studies indicate that journalists who receive focused training demonstrate greater competence in sourcing, framing, and analysing rights-related issues. Additionally, the adoption of editorial guidelines and ethical codes within media houses strengthens newsroom accountability and encourages coverage that aligns with Social Responsibility norms.

### **3.10 Audience Awareness and Demand for Accountability Journalism**

A final prospect relates to audience expectations and engagement. Research shows that Nigerian audiences are increasingly literate in rights discourse and actively seek news that interrogates governance, social justice, and institutional accountability (Adewale, 2023).

This rising demand incentivizes newspapers to prioritize human rights reporting, adopt innovative storytelling formats, and ensure that content is accessible, credible, and informative. Audience engagement also reinforces the feedback loop between media and society, motivating newspapers to maintain high standards of coverage and ethical reporting.

## **4. IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM PRACTICE AND POLICY**

The preceding analysis of challenges and prospects of newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria yields several critical implications for both journalistic practice and media policy. Addressing these implications is essential for enhancing the normative role of newspapers as facilitators of democratic accountability, civic engagement, and social justice. The prevalence of professional and ethical constraints underscores the need for strengthened newsroom ethics and autonomy. Media organisations should institutionalise editorial codes that prioritise human rights reporting, ensure adherence to professional standards, and protect journalists from undue interference (Omobola, 2024). Additionally,

editorial independence should be safeguarded against political and commercial pressures, enabling reporters to pursue investigative and analytical coverage without fear of reprisal.

Research indicates that newspapers with higher levels of editorial autonomy are more likely to produce balanced and critical reporting, particularly on politically sensitive or socially contentious issues (Lawal, Babatunde, & Olaoye, 2025). Implementing robust ethical frameworks and institutional safeguards thus enhances the credibility, accountability, and societal relevance of newspapers.

Another implication concerns the professional competence of journalists. Human rights literacy, including understanding legal frameworks, social justice principles, and international conventions, equips journalists to frame and contextualise rights issues accurately and responsibly (Ogunyemi, 2017).

Journalism schools, professional associations, and media training institutes should prioritise curricula and workshops focused on rights-based reporting, investigative techniques, and ethical decision-making. Empirical studies show that journalists with targeted training are more likely to incorporate diverse sources, contextualise news events, and maintain analytical depth, thereby enhancing the democratic function of the press (Media Rights Agenda, 2024).

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Newspaper coverage of human rights issues in Nigeria faces significant challenges that are professional, political, structural, and economic in nature. Journalists often contend with limited human rights literacy, ethical constraints, political interference, restrictive laws, commercial pressures, and source dependency. These factors result in episodic, cautious, or superficial reporting that restricts the depth, diversity, and impact of human rights coverage, limiting the press's ability to function effectively as a watchdog and platform for civic engagement.

Despite these challenges, there are promising prospects for improvement. Democratic consolidation, digital media innovations, growing civil society engagement, enhanced professional training, and rising audience awareness create opportunities for newspapers to produce more inclusive, analytical, and impactful coverage of human rights issues. By leveraging these prospects and addressing systemic constraints, Nigerian newspapers can strengthen their normative role in promoting rights awareness, accountability, and public discourse, contributing meaningfully to democratic governance and social justice.

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