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Journalists' Knowledge and Utilisation of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Combatting Corruption in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated journalists' knowledge and utilization of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Taraba State, Nigeria, particularly in relation to its role in exposing corruption in governance. Employing a quantitative research approach with a descriptive survey design, the study targeted 144 registered journalists, from which a sample of 84 respondents was selected using stratified and random sampling techniques. Data were collected through face-to-face administration of a questionnaire, ensuring content validity through expert review and confirming reliability via a pilot study. The findings revealed that while journalists in Taraba State possess a moderate level of awareness regarding the FOIA, their understanding of its provisions and practical application remains limited. The utilization of the FOIA to combat corruption was found to be low, with many journalists rarely using the law to expose corruption. Challenges such as bureaucratic delays, resistance from government officials, insufficient information, political pressures, and the complex process of requesting data under the FOIA were identified as major barriers to its effective use. The study recommends training for journalists on the FOIA, improvements in government response processes, stronger legal protections for journalists.

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Keywords: Journalists, Knowledge, Utilization, FOIA, Corruption, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a pervasive global challenge with far-reaching consequences on economic performance, political stability, and social cohesion. In Africa, its impact on development has resulted in widespread poverty, hunger, and inadequate infrastructure (Izuchukwu, Awakessien & Awakessien, 2024; Thusi & Mlambo, 2023). In Nigeria, corruption has remained a significant hindrance to socio-economic progress since independence. Despite the establishment of anti-corruption agencies such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC), corruption persists at alarming levels (Egwemi, 2012). Suntai and Targema (2018) identified inadequate access to information as a significant obstacle in combating corruption. Citing Daramola (2003), they noted that some of the most corrupt administrations in Nigeria were shielded by laws like the *Official Secrets Act* (1961), *Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation*) Decree (1976 and 1984), *Newspaper (Prohibition from Circulation and Validation)* Decree (1976), and the *State Security (Detention of Persons) Decree (1984)*. These laws classified vital records as 'confidential,' frustrating efforts to investigate government activities and uncover corruption.

The media, often referred to as the "fourth estate of the realm" and the "watchdog of society," plays a critical role in informing, educating, and holding the government accountable. However, over the years, the media has been constrained by limited access to information, especially from public institutions. This limitation fuelled the push for the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), as access to information is central to promoting accountability and transparency in governance. Akor and Oko (2015) argue that providing consistent information to the public enhances transparency and curtails corruption. Open societies, where information flows freely, create less fertile ground for corruption to thrive, while a lack of information perpetuates it. Though, there is no absolute freedom of the press or speech anywhere in the world, but developed democracies such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada enjoy greater levels of press freedom compared to developing nations like Nigeria (Ezeah, 2004). In Nigeria, years of military rule entrenched laws that restricted freedom of speech and suppressed the press. However, with the return

to democratic governance and advancements in new media technologies, the culture of secrecy is gradually eroding, and the demand for freedom of information has intensified. This culminated in the signing of the Nigerian Freedom of Information Bill into law by President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan on 28 May 2011.

The FOIA represents a significant step toward dismantling the secrecy that has long characterised Nigerian public institutions and created opportunities for corruption (Suntai & Targema, 2018). The Act empowers journalists and citizens to access public information through legally sanctioned processes. This is especially critical for investigative journalism, which seeks to uncover hidden malpractices, particularly among public officials. However, Ezeah (2004) highlights the historical struggle of Nigerian journalism, which has faced restricted access to information, government interference, and risks such as imprisonment and even death. The enactment of the FOIA provides an opportunity for journalists to fulfil their professional mandate effectively. If properly utilised, the FOIA can become a powerful tool for exposing corruption and fostering accountability in governance. This study investigates the extent to which journalists in Taraba State leverage the FOIA in exposing corruption.

Statement of the Problem

Over the years, Nigeria has consistently ranked among the countries with the highest levels of corruption, a trend that has significantly hindered its development (Nderibe, 2011). The persistent diversion of public funds by politicians and government officials has left many development projects unrealised, remaining merely conceptual rather than tangible realities. Scholars such as Duru (2016), Sambe (2008), and Abone and Kur (2014) have argued that corruption in Nigeria thrives in an environment where government officials are not held accountable and media institutions are denied access to vital information necessary for public oversight. Scholars (Duru 2016) contend that the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), enacted in 2011, holds significant potential to empower journalists in their watchdog role and promote transparency in governance. However, despite this legal framework, the extent to which journalists have appropriated the FOIA to combat corruption remains underexplored.

Existing studies, such as those by Apuke (2016) and Dunu and Ugbo (2014), have primarily focused on journalists' awareness, knowledge, and perceptions of the FOIA, but have not adequately examined the practical application of the law in investigative journalism or its

impact on corruption in Nigeria. This gap in the literature underscores the need for empirical research to assess how journalists utilise the FOIA to expose and mitigate corrupt practices. Against this backdrop, this study investigates the extent to which journalists in Taraba State have leveraged the FOIA to address corruption.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the knowledge level of of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) among journalists in Taraba State Nigeria?
2. To what extent do journalists in Taraba State utilize the FOIA in addressing corruption in governance?
3. What challenges do journalists in Taraba State encounter when using the FOIA to expose corrupt practices?

Literature Review

Freedom of Information Law

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) represents the public's right to access information held by government officials and institutions. This right, grounded in international law, is recognised as a fundamental human right. According to Ojo (2015), all citizens have the inherent entitlement to enjoy this right, which facilitates transparency and accountability in governance. The FOIA builds upon the foundational right to freedom of expression, as established in Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). This article defines freedom of expression as encompassing the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any medium, regardless of borders. Other international frameworks, including the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966), *the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, and the *American Convention on Human Rights* (1969), also affirm this right. Information is central to human existence and decision-making, as the quality and accuracy of decisions are often determined by the quality of available information.

The pursuit of a Freedom of Information law in Nigeria can be traced back to 1993 during the regime of General Sani Abacha, a period marked by significant suppression of the press and journalists. Ogbuokiri (2011) notes that the Media Rights Agenda (MRA), Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), and the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ) Lagos Chapter initiated the FOI Bill. Their aim was to create guiding principles for access to public

documents and information to guarantee freedom of expression. The FOI Bill underwent multiple reviews before its eventual enactment. In 1999, during the return to democratic governance, the bill was presented to the National Assembly. It was passed by the House of Representatives in 2004 and the Senate in 2006 but was not signed into law before President Olusegun Obasanjo left office in 2007. Reintroduced in 2008, the bill gained traction through extensive public sensitisation campaigns led by the Freedom of Information Coalition (FOIC), despite facing significant opposition. On May 26, 2011, the National Assembly harmonised the bill's provisions, and it was signed into law by President Goodluck Jonathan on May 28, 2011. The FOIA guarantees access to information held by public institutions, with notable provisions including the right of access to information held by public and some private institutions performing public functions or receiving public funds and limited exemptions to the public's right to information, with provisions for overriding public interest in specific cases among others.

While the FOIA promotes transparency, it is not without limitations. Access to information may be denied under specific circumstances, such as matters concerning national security (FOIA, 2011, *Section 11*) or personal information (FOIA, *Section 14*), which includes sensitive details related to individuals' private or professional affairs. These exemptions highlight the need to balance freedom of information with other fundamental rights, such as privacy and national security. The FOIA has become a cornerstone for fostering accountability in governance, empowering citizens, and equipping journalists to perform their watchdog role effectively. However, its full potential is yet to be realised due to challenges in implementation and public awareness.

The Media and the Fight against Corruption

In contemporary societies, free mass media play a pivotal role as an external force in combating corruption by serving as a mechanism of checks and balances. As the fourth estate, the media uphold democratic principles by monitoring compliance with laws and norms. Unlike the institutional powers of the legislature, executive, and judiciary, the media lack formal authority to sanction corrupt officials but exert public control indirectly (Stapenhurst, 2000). Acting as watchdogs, they hold decision-makers accountable and often aid prosecutorial institutions by uncovering and reporting corruption cases, which can lead to investigations and sanctions. A notable instance is the resignation of Iceland's Prime

Minister after the Panama Papers exposé, demonstrating how public outrage, fuelled by media coverage, can pressure leaders into accountability (Schedler, 1999).

Mass media further bolster horizontal accountability by exposing deficiencies in anti-corruption agencies and advocating for institutional reforms. By raising public awareness about the operations of oversight mechanisms, media coverage legitimises and strengthens state anti-corruption bodies (Camaj, 2012). This interplay enhances the political system's institutional design, which is a key determinant of corruption levels (Lederman, Loayza, & Soares, 2005). Additionally, the media act as a civic forum for airing grievances and shaping public opinion. Highlighting maladministration and scandals fosters public pressure on corrupt officials to resign and deters law violations through reputational damage (Astolfi, 2022). These campaigns are especially impactful in cases of extortive corruption, where victims seek redress. However, addressing collusive corruption requires investigative journalism.

The media's role extends to fostering a climate of transparency within society, which mitigates systemic and individual corruption (Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010). Nonetheless, transparency must be paired with the public's capacity to process and act on available information to yield significant result**s.** Critics argue that governments' ability to manipulate media narratives can undermine corruption deterrence (Stapenhurst, 2000). Furthermore, the preventive role of watchdog media is rooted in deterrence theory, which posits that increasing the likelihood of exposure and punishment discourages corrupt activities (Becker, 1974). However, effective deterrence hinges on the collaboration of robust legal frameworks, media exposure, and judicial action. Weak or corrupt institutions diminish the media's capacity to deter corruption effectively.

The media also contribute to curbing corruption through intangible effects, such as fostering political pluralism, stimulating public debate, and heightening accountability among officials. Independent and assertive journalism nurtures an anti-corruption culture by shaping public attitudes and social norms regarding corrupt behaviour (Mensah, 2019). Empirical evidence underscores the significance of corruption awareness, societal norms, and access to information as deterrents against corruption. However, for journalists to expose corruption effectively, the media must operate without legal, political, or economic constraints (Freedom House, 2015). These freedoms are critical to sustaining a vibrant media landscape capable of holding power to account (Norris, 2004).

Review of Empirical Studies

Research into the role of mass media and Freedom of Information (FOI) laws in addressing corruption and improving governance has provided valuable insights across various contexts. Escaleras, Lin, and Register (2008) conducted an analysis of data from 128 countries between 1984 and 2003. They found no significant relationship between the enactment of FOI laws and reduced corruption. In contrast, Starke, Teresa, and Scherer (2016) examined 157 countries, focusing on media freedom, internet access, and government online services. Their study found that these factors significantly reduced corruption, with internet-related variables having a particularly lasting impact over time.

In Nigeria, Abone and Kur (2014) investigated journalists' perceptions of the FOI Act in Anambra State. They found high levels of awareness and a generally positive view of the Act's impact on journalism. However, they highlighted the need to review ambiguous provisions and encourage journalists to better utilise the Act. Similarly, Dunu and Ugbo (2014) assessed journalists in the South-East zone of Nigeria. While awareness of the FOI Act was high, most journalists had not used it in their reporting due to challenges in accessing information and bureaucratic barriers. Apuke (2016) also evaluated journalists' awareness of the FOI Act and its practical application. While journalists were well-informed about the Act, access to government-held information remained limited, and the study emphasised the need for journalists to deepen their understanding of the Act and advocate for its full implementation. Duru (2016) explored the FOI Act's potential to enhance transparency and accountability in Nigeria. The study stressed that while the Act is a critical tool for good governance, its success depends on effective implementation and active citizen engagement.

Further, Suntai and Targema (2018) examined the FOI Act's relevance in combating corruption, focusing on journalists and civil society in Jalingo. Despite widespread awareness, the study revealed limited use of the Act due to fears of harassment, journalist corruption, and conflicting personal interests. They called for stronger institutional safeguards and ethical practices to encourage its effective utilisation. Similarly, Adeniji (2017) identified challenges hindering the effectiveness of the FOI Act in Nigeria, including low public awareness and the absence of a regulatory body to oversee its enforcement. Nnanwuba, Nwakego, and Chukwuweike (2019) assessed the FOI Act's implementation and its benefits for journalism. They noted advantages such as legal protection and reduced

costs for accessing information, but highlighted that journalists remained reluctant to use the Act due to legal, political, and cultural barriers.

The reviewed studies collectively demonstrate that while FOI legislation is a critical tool for promoting transparency and good governance, its effectiveness is often undermined by implementation challenges and systemic barriers. Additionally, most of the prior studies did not specifically examine the extent to which the Act is used by journalists in the fight against corruption in Nigeria. This gap is one that the current study seeks to address.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Libertarian Theory of the Press, which serves as the theoretical foundation for understanding the role of the media in promoting press freedom and transparency. Advocated by thinkers such as John Milton, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Thomas Jefferson, libertarianism is based on the principle of a "self-rightening" marketplace of ideas. It posits that, in a free society, the truth will naturally emerge as a result of open debate, allowing good ideas to prevail over bad ones (Bitner, 1989; Sambe, 2008; Nwabueze, 2014). Consequently, any restrictions on freedom of expression are strongly criticized under this theory. Emerging in 17th-century Europe, the libertarian press theory stands in stark contrast to the authoritarian press model, which subjected the press to strict governmental control. Under authoritarianism, the press was seen as an instrument of the state, tasked with protecting its interests and complying with state mandates. In contrast, the libertarian approach grants the press complete freedom, devoid of censorship or external interference. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to the present study.

In the Nigerian context, the 1999 Constitution (as amended) guarantees freedom of expression under Section 39, but the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) further expands the scope of press freedom by ensuring public access to a wide range of information, including documents related to corruption. While the Constitution provides for freedom of expression, many official records remain classified or hidden under bureaucratic secrecy. The introduction of the FOIA, however, limits the scope of such classified information, establishes protocols for accessing official records, and mandates penalties for agencies that fail to disclose requested information. In this sense, the FOIA introduces a new dimension to press freedom in Nigeria. The Libertarian Theory of the Press provides a suitable framework for this study because it emphasizes the media's moral and social responsibility

to inform the public accurately and objectively. Journalists and the media, by leveraging the FOIA to expose corruption, fulfill their social duty to the public, promoting transparency and accountability. This act of using the FOIA to uncover corruption aligns with the libertarian ideal of a free and responsible press that serves the public interest.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research approach, utilizing a descriptive survey design. The population consisted of 144 registered journalists in Taraba State, Nigeria categorized into four chapels of the Nigerian Union of Journalists, Taraba State chapter: Correspondent, TTV, NTA, and TSBS chapels. A sample size of 84 respondents was selected. Stratified and random sampling methods were applied to ensure the sample was representative of the population across the four chapels. Data collection was facilitated through questionnaire. To ensure the validity of the instrument, content validity was tested by two experts in the field of communication at Taraba State University, Jalingo, while reliability was confirmed through a pilot study. The data were collected using face-to-face interactions, where the researcher personally administered the questionnaires to the respondents. Descriptive statistical tools, including percentages, frequency tables, mean and standard deviation were used for data analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents

Responses	***N*=84**	**Percentage (%)**
Gender		
Male	44	52
Female	40	48
Edu. Level		
Diploma/NCE	38	45.2
Degree	36	42.9
Masters	8	9.5
PhD	2	2.4
Chapel or Media Org.		
TSBS	25	29.8

TTV	20	23.8
NTA	24	28.6
Correspondent Chapel	15	17.8
Marital Status		
Married	54	64.3
Single	30	35.7
Work experience		
18 years – 25years	28	33.3
26years – 30years	8	9.5
32years – 35years	8	9.6
36years and above	40	47.6

The table presents demographic information about 84 respondents, providing insights into the gender, educational level, media organization affiliation, marital status, and work experience of journalists in relation to their knowledge and utilization of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act. A slight majority of respondents are male (52%), with females comprising 48%. In terms of education, most respondents hold either a Diploma/NCE (45.2%) or a Degree (42.9%), with only a small proportion possessing higher qualifications like a Master's (9.5%) or PhD (2.4%). Regarding media organization affiliation, journalists from TSBS represent the largest group (29.8%), followed by NTA (28.6%) and TTV (23.8%). The majority are married (64.3%), and most respondents have extensive work experience, with 47.6% having over 36 years in the profession, which could indicate a wealth of knowledge in media practices, including the use of the FOI Act in combating corruption.

Table 2: Journalists Knowledge of Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	$(\bar{x})$	SD
I am aware of the existence of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in Nigeria.	5 (5.95%)	8 (9.52%)	20 (23.81%)	40 (47.62%)	11 (13.10%)	3.15	1.07
I understand the main provisions of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).	4 (4.76%)	10 (11.90%)	30 (35.71%)	35 (41.67%)	5 (5.95%)	2.91	0.98
I am familiar with the process for requesting	6 (7.14%)	12	28	34	4 (4.76%)	2.85	1.02

information under the FOIA.		(14.29%)	(33.33%)	(40.48%)			
I have received formal training or education on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).	20 (23.81%)	30 (35.71%)	20 (23.81%)	10 (11.90%)	4 (4.76%)	2.00	1.06
I know the types of information that can be accessed under the FOIA.	8 (9.52%)	15 (17.86%)	25 (29.76%)	30 (35.71%)	6 (7.14%)	2.83	1.01
I can explain how the FOIA can be used in the fight against corruption in Nigeria.	7 (8.33%)	12 (14.29%)	24 (28.57%)	35 (41.67%)	6 (7.14%)	2.92	0.98
I am aware of the legal consequences for non-compliance with the FOIA.	10 (11.90%)	20 (23.81%)	24 (28.57%)	25 (29.76%)	5 (5.95%)	2.68	1.02
I am confident in my ability to use the FOIA in my journalistic work.	25 (29.76%)	35 (41.67%)	15 (17.86%)	6 (7.14%)	3 (3.57%)	1.74	1.07

The data presented in Table 2 reveals the varying levels of knowledge among journalists in Nigeria regarding the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The majority of respondents (47.62%) reported being aware of the existence of the FOIA, with a mean score of 3.15 and a standard deviation of 1.07, suggesting a moderate level of awareness. However, knowledge of the main provisions of the FOIA was less robust, with a mean score of 2.91 and a standard deviation of 0.98, indicating that while many journalists have a basic understanding, there is still room for improvement. On the other hand, familiarity with the process for requesting information under the FOIA scored lower (mean = 2.85, SD = 1.02), highlighting a gap in practical knowledge. Formal training on the FOIA is notably low, as indicated by the mean score of 2.00 and standard deviation of 1.06, with a significant percentage (23.81%) indicating no training. While respondents generally know the types of information accessible under the FOIA (mean = 2.83, SD = 1.01), awareness of legal consequences for non-compliance is relatively weak, with a mean score of 2.68 and a standard deviation of 1.02. The lowest level of knowledge was observed regarding confidence in using the FOIA in journalistic work, with a mean score of 1.74 and a standard deviation of 1.07. Overall, the findings suggest that while journalists in Nigeria have some awareness of the FOIA, substantial gaps remain in their understanding.

Table 3: Journalists' Utilization of the FOIA in Addressing Corruption in Governance

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	$\bar{x}$	SD
I frequently use the FOIA to obtain information about government activities related to corruption.	25 (29.76%)	35 (41.67%)	15 (17.86%)	6 (7.14%)	3 (3.57%)	1.74	1.07
I actively seek out information under the FOIA to report on corrupt practices within government institutions.	22 (26.19%)	30 (35.71%)	20 (23.81%)	8 (9.52%)	4 (4.76%)	1.86	1.05
I have used the FOIA to request information that directly relates to corruption cases in my journalistic work.	28 (33.33%)	35 (41.67%)	15 (17.86%)	5 (5.95%)	1 (1.19%)	1.60	1.08
Journalists in my network often discuss or share their experiences in using the FOIA to combat corruption.	30 (35.71%)	35 (41.67%)	10 (11.90%)	5 (5.95%)	4 (4.76%)	1.59	1.09
My journalistic work is often influenced by the information I obtain through the FOIA, especially concerning corruption in governance.	30 (35.71%)	40 (47.62%)	10 (11.90%)	3 (3.57%)	1 (1.19%)	1.50	1.12

The data in Table 3 reveal a significant underutilization of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) by journalists in Taraba State in addressing corruption within governance. A majority of respondents indicated that they either strongly disagree or disagree with statements regarding the frequent use of the FOIA to obtain information related to government corruption. For instance, the mean scores for all items are notably low, ranging from 1.50 to 1.86, suggesting that journalists are not actively seeking or using the FOIA to report on corruption. Additionally, the low percentages of journalists agreeing or strongly agreeing with these statements (mostly below 10%) further emphasize this lack of engagement with the FOIA. The standard deviations also show variation in responses, but overall, the findings point to limited use of the FOIA as a tool for investigative journalism concerning corruption in governance.

Table 4: Challenges Faced by Journalists in Using the FOIA to Address Corruption in Governance

Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	$\bar{x}$	SD
I face bureaucratic delays when requesting information through the FOIA.	5 (5.95%)	10 (11.90%)	10 (11.90%)	40 (47.62%)	19 (22.62%)	3.74	1.07
I encounter resistance from government officials when attempting to access information under the FOIA.	4 (4.76%)	8 (9.52%)	7 (8.33%)	40 (47.62%)	25 (29.76%)	3.93	1.05
The information I receive through the FOIA is often incomplete or insufficient for investigative purposes.	5 (5.95%)	7 (8.33%)	10 (11.90%)	45 (53.57%)	17 (20.24%)	3.80	1.02
The process of requesting information under the FOIA is too complicated and time-consuming.	6 (7.14%)	9 (10.71%)	8 (9.52%)	45 (53.57%)	16 (19.05%)	3.80	1.04
Government institutions often ignore or reject FOIA requests without providing valid reasons.	5 (5.95%)	6 (7.14%)	10 (11.90%)	42 (50.00%)	21 (25.00%)	3.88	1.05
Political pressures or threats discourage journalists from using the FOIA to expose corruption.	4 (4.76%)	8 (9.52%)	9 (10.71%)	43 (51.19%)	20 (23.81%)	3.84	1.03
I lack the resources (time, manpower, funding) to pursue FOIA requests effectively.	5 (5.95%)	10 (11.90%)	6 (7.14%)	42 (50.00%)	21 (25.00%)	3.88	1.02
The legal framework surrounding the FOIA is inadequate to ensure effective implementation and transparency.	7 (8.33%)	9 (10.71%)	8 (9.52%)	40 (47.62%)	20 (23.81%)	3.76	1.06

The data in Table 4 highlight several challenges faced by journalists in Taraba State when using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to address corruption in governance. The majority of journalists report encountering bureaucratic delays ($\bar{x}$ = 3.74), resistance from government officials ($\bar{x}$ = 3.93), and receiving incomplete or insufficient information for investigative purposes ($\bar{x}$ = 3.80). Additionally, journalists find the process of requesting information to be complicated and time-consuming ($\bar{x}$ = 3.80), and many experience

rejections or a lack of valid reasons for denied FOIA requests ($\bar{x}$ = 3.88). Political pressures or threats also discourage the use of the FOIA ($\bar{x}$ = 3.84), and journalists often lack the necessary resources, such as time, manpower, and funding, to pursue FOIA requests effectively ($\bar{x}$ = 3.88). Lastly, the inadequate legal framework surrounding the FOIA is seen as a barrier to its effective implementation and transparency ($\bar{x}$ = 3.76). These findings suggest that journalists face significant obstacles in utilizing the FOIA to expose corruption in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to examine journalists' knowledge and utilization of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) as well as the challenges they face in using the law to expose corruption. The findings reveal that journalists in Taraba State have a moderate level of awareness regarding the FOIA. While a majority of the respondents are aware of the law, their understanding of its key provisions and the practical process of using the FOIA remains limited. This aligns with findings by Dunu and Ugbo (2014) and Apuke (2016), who observed similar levels of awareness among journalists in Southeast Nigeria and Taraba State, respectively.

The study further revealed that the utilization of the FOIA to combat corruption in governance is low. Most respondents indicated infrequent use of the law to expose corruption, a finding consistent with Apuke (2016), who also noted a gap between awareness and actual use of the FOIA among journalists in Taraba State. Abone and Kur (2014) similarly argued that despite the law's existence, its application remains largely theoretical, with journalists under-utilizing it. This suggests that while journalists are aware of the FOIA, its practical application in investigative journalism is still limited.

Moreover, the study identified several challenges contributing to the under-utilization of the FOIA. Journalists face bureaucratic delays, resistance from government officials, and incomplete or insufficient information when requesting data under the FOIA. Additionally, the process of requesting information is often time-consuming and complicated. Political pressures and threats also discourage journalists from using the FOIA to expose corruption. These challenges echo the findings of previous studies, such as those by Suntai and Targema (2018), Dunu and Ugbo (2014), Duru (2016), and Freedom House (2015), which highlighted various barriers faced by journalists in applying the FOIA. Suntai and

Targema (2018) pointed to harassment and intimidation by state actors as a significant challenge undermining the utilization of the FOIA. Dunu and Ugbo (2014) noted the poor welfare of journalists and media ownership issues, while Duru (2016) emphasized the lack of enthusiasm for investigative journalism, compounded by the risks involved. The challenges identified in this study highlight a gap between the ideal of press freedom espoused by the Libertarian theory and the realities journalists face in applying the FOIA to promote transparency and accountability in governance.

CONCLUSION

The study reveal a critical gap between knowledge and effective utilization of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) among journalists in Taraba State. While journalists demonstrate moderate knowledge of the law, the challenges they face—such as bureaucratic delays, resistance from government officials, and political pressures—significantly hinder its practical application in exposing corruption. This situation calls for a more robust approach to empowering journalists with the tools, resources, and legal protections needed to leverage the FOIA effectively. It is evident that to enhance transparency and accountability, both the government and media organizations must work together to address these barriers, ensuring that the FOIA serves its intended purpose of promoting good governance and fighting corruption. Without overcoming these obstacles, the FOIA remains an underutilized tool, failing to live up to its potential in fostering a more transparent society.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Journalists in Nigeria should receive regular training on the full provisions and practical application of the FOIA. This will help bridge the knowledge gap and equip journalists with the skills needed to effectively use the law for investigative journalism.
2. The government should ensure a more transparent and efficient process for responding to FOIA requests. This includes reducing bureaucratic delays and ensuring that government officials are held accountable for the timely provision of information.

3. Strong legal protections should be provided to journalists to shield them from harassment, intimidation, and political pressures when using the FOIA.
4. There is a need for further studies across various states in Nigeria to validate the findings of this study and to draw more robust generalizations regarding the involvement of journalists with the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in investigative journalism, particularly in addressing corruption in governance.

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